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CHARLIE CAREW:

AND OTHER STORIES.

BY

ANNIE THOMAS,

(MRS. PENDER CUDLIP),

AUTHOR OF "DENIS DONNE," "ON GUARD," "PLAYED OUT," ETC.

LONDON:

ARTHUR H. MOXON,

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CHARLIE CAREW.

CHAPTER I.

DI'S ENGAGEMENT.

THE curtain rises on an excessively comfortable scene—the dining-room of a house that ranks midway between farm homestead and country mansion, and that consequently, after the manner of such houses, combines the comforts of the one with many of the luxuries of the other.

At the head of the table an elderly lady is seated. She is engaged in carving a chicken, and pressing a "bit of the breast, or a wing, say," simultaneously upon every other member of the company; which consists, firstly, of her eldest daughter—to give due precedence to the ladies—Miss Prescott, known as "Di" to her intimates, by reason of her god-parents having, in a thoughtless hour, elected to name her "Dinah." The supper which graces the table is in celebration of the return of this young lady from a six-weeks' sojourn in the great metropolis.

While Di is appeasing her hunger, and before I

pass on to her sister and brothers, I will describe her to you. The moment of assuaging the appetite has been declared by divers great authorities (Byron amongst the number) to be an unfortunate one as far as a woman's appearance goes. If this be a fact, it certainly is an unfortunate one; for in these latter days we are not ethereal creatures that can live upon air, and love, and the like intangibilities; we must eat, and eat frequently; and if we are unprepossessing while doing so, woe be to us.

If we are unprepossessing: but I utterly deny the implication. In defiance, therefore, of poetical prejudice, I will select this unpropitious period for painting Di Prescott's portrait.

A pretty, small, compact figure, rounded and plump; showing plenty of "breeding" (though she was only a tenant farmer's daughter!) in her slim wrists and ankles—plenty of breeding, and not a bit of bone; showing breeding, also, in the way her small, classical head was poised on her shoulders; showing it, more than all else, in the frank stand she took in being what she was, and nothing more.

I have called hers a "classical" head; and this it was, and the features corresponded with it thoroughly. But it was not of the severe, cold, statuesque classical order. It was perfectly pure in form; but it was alive with colour, warmth, and expression; and so an improvement, to my mind, on the chill marble beauties from whom we gain our notion of what constitutes classical beauty.

Properly speaking, she could not be called either blonde or brunette. She had a fair, sanguine, rose-leaf complexion, soft dark hair, and hazel eyes. A charming face altogether; one that was always laughing, and blushing, and dimpling all over; a face, for all this, that could, when occasion called for it, express much determination.

During this before-mentioned six weeks' metropolitan sojourn of hers, she had achieved a good

portion of woman's destiny; that is to say, she had fallen in love, and been fallen in love with, and she had become engaged.

In the highly respectable suburban quarter in which she had been staying, Mr. Carew had been a man of mark. Mammas spoke of him as a man to be asked to dinner, instead of simply suffering him to drift into their drawing-rooms with the herd of an evening; and daughters repeated his sayings to one another, as they unrobed in their dressing-rooms at night—repeated them verbosely, with the strong, though unexpressed hope of damping one another's views respecting him entirely.

That highly respectable suburban quarter had vowed never again to put its trust in man, when, after a brief acquaintance with her, Mr. Carew proposed to the country girl, Di Prescott. It made croquet parties in the square garden not so pleasant to Di as they had been formerly; and it found many a flaw in Mr. Carew's habits, and prospects, and position, and forthwith pointed them out to the interloper.

When these things came to pass, Di caused herself to be peremptorily summoned home; and when she told her lover of this summons, she added, somewhat hesitatingly, "And they say I'm to tell you that they will be happy to see you, whenever you can come down, Charlie: you *will* come, won't you?"

"Of course I will, as soon as I can get leave," he replied. "Let me see, this is July; well, I will be down in September, I dare say, that is, I can get away then." And then he went on to lament his hard fate in not being able "to get away," and altogether caused Di to regard him as one of her Majesty's hardest worked and most valuable servants—which fond belief is, I imagine, entertained by the relatives and female friends of each individual member of that mighty establishment to which Mr. Carew belonged— Somerset House.

But I am digressing, as old novelists were in the

habit of observing when they had hopelessly lost the thread of their stories, and had no well-founded belief that they might ever be permitted to pick it up again; to return to the supper table.

Opposite to Mrs. Prescott, her eldest son, the master of the house, is seated. A fine, bluff, manly-looking fellow; gentle natured and soft-hearted enough, but rough-mannered, as it is the habit of entirely country-bred men to be. A man who had cultivated out-door sports, to the exclusion of most other things, and who on that account was wont to look shily upon, and to regard as effeminate or "muffs" those men with whom the field, the chase, and the gun were not paramount.

Next to Di, the new arrival, and naturally the heroine of the occasion, is Ellen, the second sister, whose appetite is not what it is wont to be, by reason of her intense anxiety to hear about the last fashions and the last play, to say nothing of Mr. Carew; and opposite to her is Willie, aged eighteen, spoken of by adoring friends as "at such an awkward age, you know," and by those who were not adoring, as "the cub."

Despite Di being the darling of the family, and the heroine of this special occasion, the conversation, when I begin to report it, had taken a turn that was not most pleasing to her.

"So you came all the way from London by yourself, my dear," Mrs. Prescott remarked (she had made the same observation precisely two minutes and a half before).

"Scarcely by myself, ma; the train was full," Di replied, laughing.

"Well, but you may call it by yourself."

"I don't see why I should call it anything of the kind."

"I do wonder, that I do, that Mr. Carew shouldn't have wished to come with you."

"*He* had something better to do, I suppose," Henry

Prescott, the elder brother, struck in gruffly. He loved his sister Di most dearly; but this engagement of hers with a London man seemed to him a flagrant disregard of the country blessings that were around her.

"He hadn't anything better to do, but he couldn't get away," Di replied, good humouredly.

Here the cub saw his opportunity, and seized it. Di was dear to him too, very dear; but he had gathered his ideas of fine London gentlemen from sundry loud rowdy specimens of the bagman genus, whom he met sometimes at the bar of the inn in the adjoining market town. So now, when Di said he couldn't get away, the cub grinned and said—

"Oh, aint he his own master, then?"

"Yes, he is; that is, in most things; but he's a Government clerk, you know, Henry," she replied, ignoring the younger brother, and turning to the elder.

"In the Customs?" Henry interrogated. His ideas on the subject were limited; the inestimable privilege of being free of the mysteries of Somerset House was not his: he never read Mr. Trollope's delightful novels.

"Customs! good gracious! no, Harry," Di answered, impatiently: "the Admiralty, of course; and he expects to be passed on to Pall Mall soon."

The magnificence of this expectation was entirely lost upon Mr. Henry Prescott; to him Somerset House and Pall Mall were of the same worth.

"But tell us what he is like, Di; never mind the boys," Ellen cried, impatiently.

"He's considered remarkably handsome: perhaps I shouldn't quite call him that myself; but he *is* very good-looking," Di replied, with a grand air of impartiality.

"I hate to hear a fellow called handsome," Henry Prescott said. "Now there's Markham—Markham is as fine a fellow as any one could care to see; but I shouldn't call him handsome."

This he said with the nearest approach to a sneer that he could achieve.

"No more should I; no more would any one call Markham handsome," Ellen retorted. Ellen was a warm partisan of Di's; and Di had won wrath to herself from the other members of her family by ignoring Jack Markham's claims on her regard.

"Don't be pert, Miss Nellie; no one cares what you would call him: you aint asked to call him anything," Willie said, abruptly. The family were apt to take sides in this way; to take sides, and stand to their guns gallantly; but they never quarrelled.

"You're only a boy," Nellie said, nodding her head at him. "You're only a boy; you musn't give an opinion."

"I'm a year older than you, any way; so if I'm only a boy, you are only a little girl."

"Ah, but we mature earlier, don't we, ma?" Nellie replied, consequentially.

"I believe I have a photograph of Charlie's somewhere," Di here remarked. She was beginning to fear that the conversation was about to drift away altogether from the subject most interesting to her at present—her lover and his looks.

"Oh! do find it, Di." Nellie, at all events, was heartily anxious to behold him.

Di searched and found not one photograph but a dozen, in divers attitudes. Caldesi, Silvy, Windlow, Hering, and many more, had all been employed at various periods in reproducing the manifold beauties of Mr. Charles Carew.

The photographs showed them a tall slight man with a close-cropped head, leaning against Ionic columns, balconies, tables, old oak chairs, against all the "properties," indeed, against which men do lean when they are being photographed.

Di waited patiently for opinions to be formed and offered. Nellie was the first to speak.

"How nice and tall, and what *delicious* whiskers and moustache."

Di could resist no longer.

"Yes, but you lose half his good looks *really* in a photograph; for he's very fair, with golden, no, not golden but tawny, hair and blue eyes, and that's all lost in a photograph."

"Don't you call Rock tawny sometimes?" Willie asked, mentioning an Irish setter.

"Yes," Di replied, carelessly.

"Well, we call him red," Willie answered, laughing.

"Oh! you horrid boy," Nellie said, energetically. "Tawny isn't red, it's fair; and fair men are the most fashionable."

"Handsome is that handsome does," Mrs. Prescott remarked cheerfully. The remark was irrelevant to those which had gone before, but that was nothing, it was so kindly meant.

"I declare I won't say another word about him till he comes down, and then you'll see for yourselves that your Jack Markham can't hold a candle to him," Di said, half pouting.

"He'll find his time heavy on his hands, won't he?" Henry Prescott interrogated. "I suppose he doesn't care much for riding?"

"Very likely he'll learn on the old grey pony," Willie suggested.

"Very likely he will if you'll learn manners," Nellie cried; and then the mother moved that, as it was late and Di was tired, the present meeting should be dissolved.

When the day came for Charlie Carew to make his advent amongst them, Miss Prescott was nearly beside herself with nervous anxiety. There had been very little more said either about her engagement or the man to whom she was engaged since that first night of her return. But though silence had been maintained she felt that her brothers were antagonistic to the plan she had formed and the one with whom she had formed it. Mutely but strongly had Henry Prescott favoured the Jack Markham alliance, and now, though mutely,

with equal earnestness was he set against the Charlie Carew one. In her anger against him for this most unjust prejudice Di called her brother "narrow-minded and ignorant. They think because he's not a fox-hunter by profession that he must be a milk-sop, but I'll not say a word till he comes, and they find out for themselves that he isn't."

In a weak hour Di proposed to her mother that their dinner hour should be altered during Mr. Carew's stay. For years, save on the occasion of regular set parties, they had dined at one at the White House, and the proposal to rush from one to six came upon Mrs. Prescott like a shower-bath. She was a woman to shrink from innovation, but not to oppose it; so now when Di said—

"Oh, ma, can't we dine at six while Charlie is here? It can't make any difference to the boys, you know, and it will give us such much better days: if we dine at one, the whole day is broken up."

"Don't you think we might make it four, Di? Four would be very convenient."

"Four would be horrid: four is not to be thought of for an instant," Di said, firmly.

"Then five, let it be five."

"Five is not a bit better than four, mamma. No, no; if it can't be six, which would be much nicer for us all, as I have often thought, let it stay at one. Any way, one is a less unholy hour than four or five."

"Well, it shall be six. I don't know what the boys will say," Mrs. Prescott said, meekly.

"They can't say anything if they have their luncheon at one," Di urged.

"Willie's always hungry; he'll be glad of the chance of making two dinners," Nellie said, promptly.

"You shouldn't laugh at Willie, dear," Mrs. Prescott observed, reprovingly. "Your brother was speaking this morning before he went out, Di, about asking a few friends here the day after to-morrow to meet Mr. Carew."

"Who will be asked?" Di said, reflectively.

"Jack Markham, I should hope," Nellie cried; "that would be rare fun. He always gnashes his teeth on his fork; he'd gnash them more than ever if he saw Di and Mr. Carew together."

"We thought of Mr. and Mrs. Peyton, Mr. and Mrs. Wingfield, and Tom and Flora Price," Mrs. Prescott replied, ignoring her youngest daughter's remark. "With ourselves they would be a nice little party."

"Ye-es," Di replied, dubiously. She did not desire to hurt her mother's feelings, but if Mr. and Mrs. Peyton, Mr. and Mrs. Wingfield, and Tom and Flora Price constituted a "nice" party in Mrs. Prescott's eyes, then her mother and herself had widely different ideas as to the proper application of the word, that was all.

The railway station at which Mr. Carew was to leave the train was some three miles and a half from the White House, and there had been some talk at the breakfast table as to the manner in which he should perform the journey by road. "Willie can fetch him in the trap with the bay mare, can't you, Willie?" Ellen had said; and Willie had replied, "No, he couldn't," very determinately, rather to Di's relief, she being dubious as to the effect her brother might produce on her lover without her saving presence.

"John can go if you like," Henry Prescott had said, turning to his sister Dinah. Now John was their sole serving man, and it occurred to Miss Prescott that perchance he would be needed at home that day.

"Well, Harry, as it's fine I don't think John's time shall be taken up. I'll have Pet put in and drive over myself."

"Oh, just as you like," her brother replied: and so it was settled that Miss Prescott herself, and her bay pony Pet, should go over for the Somerset House clerk.

"If you have the car I can go with you, Di," Ellen meaningly suggested when Di was putting on a new

hat and new gloves, and a marvellously fresh looking muslin, in order to meet the expected guest becomingly.

"But I have ordered Pet into the gig," Di replied, trying to seem indifferent about the going alone to meet him.

"There is such a thing as countermanding an order to a groom, Di; however, I'm resigned to be left behind." And then the two sisters laughed, and the elder one blushed and said, "You shall be with us so *much*, dear," which was a word of such rare promise to Miss Nellie's fair young ear that she forbore to rush about and tell every one how "Di *would* go alone," and to ask if "it wasn't a joke."

It was a charming rural little station, the one at which the Admiralty hope, Mr. Charles Carew, alighted. A charming little station, that is, if you did not want a cab, or a porter, or a strong boy to carry your luggage, for none of these things were to be had at it. For all these being lacking, though, it was a charming little station, and so Charlie Carew thought when he got out and saw Di evidently waiting for him in the road below the platform, in a well-hung little gig, drawn by a handsome bay pony.

Di felt that that drive home would not be the least pleasant part of Charlie's visit; accordingly she made no great haste to get over the ground. They had a great deal to say to one another, by which I must not be understood to mean that they had more than the usual amount of soft romance to talk, but they had each much to hear. Di wanted to be posted up in the doings of those friends with whom she had been staying when she brought Charlie down; their correspondence with her had not been by any means brisk since her return. She questioned Mr. Carew guardedly, she herself imagined, but, it must in honesty be owned, too soon after getting him into the pony-gig.

"Have I seen much of the Leslies lately? let me see. Oh, yes, I've seen them once or twice."

"I *hope* they're well," Di said with much force.

"I believe they are, thank you."

"Alice is very pretty, isn't she, Charlie, or is it you who don't admire her style?"

Charlie girded at this question in his heart. It seemed to him that Di wished him to understand that his opinions were no better to her than another fellow's.

"As it happens, I do admire her—immensely," he replied stiffly.

"Do you now?" Di said, somewhat dejectedly. "I know many—that is, I know some gentlemen don't."

"Then they have precious bad taste, that's all I can say; she looked surprisingly well the other day, at a croquet party; she was out-and-out the prettiest girl on the ground; such feet as she has! and they're booted in such a way!"

Di whipped Pet.

"But never mind the Leslies, Di, dear," Charlie went on, with the magnificence of a conqueror, "tell me about your people; what will they think of my coming down upon them in this way?"

"They will manage to stand the shock I have no doubt," Di replied, drily. She was angry with Charlie for admiring Alice Leslie and Alice Leslie's feet, and consequently she was peculiarly alive to the claims of her own family. He really was slightly to blame; no man should praise a rival to a woman who has driven three miles and a half under a burning sun to meet him.

Charlie Carew had a most thorough and manly aversion to being snubbed; he had a far less aversion to snubbing, unfortunately, but in that he is not singular.

"I have no doubt they will stand it for the time. I shall submit them to it," he said, coldly; and then Di threw off all semblance of annoyance with him, and cried—

"Oh, Charlie, you will stay all the time you can—won't you?"

"That depends on the way I am received," he replied, steadily. And then poor Di felt that she had done an unwise thing in bringing this visit about, till Jack Markham's claims were finally and for ever set at rest.

For Charlie was evidently not a man to be coolly treated with impunity; and she knew that Henry was very much in the mind thus to treat any rival of his friend Jack Markham. All things local were in favour of Jack's suit to Miss Prescott, and it was with things local alone that Henry Prescott had to do, as he was wont to avow with frequency and pride. A pack of harriers would have been kept between the two men had Di only been wise, and they could assist one another in a thousand ways, as their farms were situated near together. Di could but remember how entirely her eldest brother's heart had been set on her marriage with Jack Markham, as she drove Mr. Carew home to the White House, and Mr. Carew proved to her that he was well prepared to stand upon his dignity.

As they drove up the sweep that led through the outer lawn, past the farm buildings and up to the front of the house, Miss Prescott saw that the whole family had assembled themselves on the garden lawn.

"That was a happy thought—Nell's probably," she said to herself; "it will do away with half the stiffness of the introduction." Then she said aloud hurriedly —"See, Charlie, they have all come out to meet you! Don't mind if my brothers are a little rough—don't mind for *my* sake!"

And she looked so beaming, bright, and beautiful as she asked it, that he promised her warmly and set her mind at rest.

He was a handsome young fellow this Charlie Carew; not so tall as he had appeared in his photographs, but slim, dapper, easy in movement, with a good-looking

face, and a graceful carriage, and hair and whiskers of the fair hue that Di called "tawny," and Ellen "fashionable." He met his future mother, and brothers and sisters-in-law very pleasantly now—far more pleasantly and affably and openly than they met him; for he was so complete a realization of her ideal that Ellen was conscious of a certain agitation which she afterwards described to Di "as being in a delicious tremble;" while Henry and Willie could but feel resentment obtaining in their souls against a man who was about to take something precious from them, and who yet evidently was not much distressed in the effort to win their good opinion.

"Now *do* be a dear boy, and don't look superior," Di found time to whisper to Charlie as they crossed the lawn towards the family group. And the mighty monarch of her soul promised that he would not "be superior," or anything else that he ought not to be.

The first evening that Charlie Carew spent with the family of his betrothed may be counted as a success, insomuch that it was not a decided failure.

"I can't say that either of your brothers are garrulously given, Di," he said to her the following morning. "Henry asked me if I smoked, and Willie if I rode; and when I had replied 'a little,' to both questions, they suffered their respective subjects to fall to the ground utterly."

"Ah! they'll talk more when they know you better, dear," she said, encouragingly. Then he laughed in his heart at the tone she assumed with reference to those whom he called "her bucolic brothers." In fact, Mr. Charlie Carew, the spoilt pet of a Bayswater *coterie*, was beginning to think that he had thrown himself away without sufficient cause. He remembered that Di had been very easily won, and he told himself that it was because she had seen nothing so brilliant as himself in all her former experience. He was not ungenerous, but it did occur to him that it would be

just as well to "keep up" the profound impression he had made upon her pastoral mind.

But for all this resolve of his they spent a very happy day—that first one after his arrival at the White House.

CHAPTER II.

"THE OTHER DAY."

It may as well be acknowledged at once that Charlie Carew was not an enthusiastic sportsman. He was quite capable of carrying a gun for several hours, and of bringing a few birds down with the same, in congenial society, or when he was alone. But he was incapable—he felt after ten minutes of it—of "carrying on a conversation with the two Prescotts and bringing himself down to the level of Jack Markham, under the shallow pretence of sharing their sports." In fact, it may as well also be acknowledged that the young Admiralty clerk was very much inclined to give himself scarcely 'airs" but "zephyrs" of consequence.

Mr. Markham had come over to the Prescotts to breakfast on the day the events of which will be described in this chapter. It goes without saying that his former pretensions to her hand and affections had been lightly alluded to by Miss Di in more than one of her confidential conversations with the successful aspirant, and Charlie had consequently been rather curious to see this "Jack" who, though rejected, was evidently the reverse of scorned by the young lady. But Mr. Carew came of a class that can keep its feelings well within bounds. "Who's Jack Markham?" he asked, indifferently, when Di went out into the garden over the wet grass to meet him and call him in to breakfast, with the tidings "that Jack Markham had come."

"He has a bad memory for the other men who have

cared for me," the girl thought, almost angrily. But she forgave him when, on her explaining who Jack was, Mr. Carew put her hand on his arm and asked her to "come in and introduce him at once—Markham must be a good fellow to have fallen in love with her."

Mr. Markham was a capital type of the men of good landed property who rank with, but after, the "county gentlemen." His estate was good, but it was small enough for him to farm the whole of it—he was not in the proud position of a landlord—he "held" not his "own" only but the whole of his own.

For a man who had known no other instruction than the best collegiate establishment his own county could boast of could give, Mr. Jack Markham was very fairly educated. Moreover, he had read a great deal since his schooldays, and so had educated himself. What he lacked was the knowledge the world alone can give men; and with the exception of sundry stray visits to London (paid chiefly when the cattle show was on), and one brief, bewildering week in Paris, he knew nothing of the world.

But for all this lack of experience he was a man to whom the fairer portion of his own *coterie* inclined very kindly. He was handsome, well grown, well mannered, though not polished—a crack shot, a capital cricketer, a plucky rider, a free-hearted, open-handed, hospitable, honourable, generous fellow altogether—a man who was heartily well liked by his own sex. His want of success with Miss Prescott was in nowise attributed to any shortcoming on his part by a single person who knew about it—and Jack spoke very freely of his failures. It was universally put down to a want of common sense in Di. People looked upon her as "spoilt" by Jack's love; they believed that the time Mr. Markham had employed in wooing her had been so maddeningly flattering to her that her head had been turned to the point of rejecting him.

It was not in handsome, blue-eyed, chestnut-haired Jack to let his cheek grow pale with care because a

woman undervalued him. He was very fond of Di still; but he knew himself to be quite equal to the trial of seeing her with her betrothed without any undue signs of that fondness manifesting themselves. "If anything should happen to break it off with the swell, I'll have another shot at Di," he said to her brother Henry; "but I am not going to make her uncomfortable by keeping away from your house while Carew is there."

"Then come over to breakfast on Thursday," Henry said; and he did not feel called upon to add that, to the best of his belief, Di would not be made unhappy by his absence or presence or anything about him.

Without being anything of a dandy, Mr. Jack Markham knew too well what he was about where women were concerned ever to appear before them in negligent attire. He did not contrast unfavourably with the Poole-clothed Mr Carew, even Di was fain to confess when he stood up to be introduced to his successful rival. His brown ribbed velvet shooting suit was very quiet but very perfect. "Fellow actually knows how to dress," Mr. Carew thought as he sat down opposite to Jack. "He'd be good-looking, too, if he were well set up and had less pink in his cheeks," which was an uncalled-for, not to say an unjust addenda; for Jack, though not well "set up," in the military sense, stood straight as an arrow, and had the full, free, unfettered swing of limb and gait which plenty of out-door exercise, in good boots and on good horses, is apt to give a man.

"Now go and make yourself more killing," Nellie whispered to Mr. Carew, as he was passing her after breakfast to go and prepare himself for joining the shooting party, "or Di will be turning to the 'old love' again in that nice coat." At which suggestion Di tossed her head, and Charlie smiled superciliously.

"Thanks for the hint, Nellie," he said, good-temperedly; "but though I'm not vain, I don't find the old love at all formidable." Then he went up to dress,

and the two girls strolled into the garden to wait and see the start.

Nellie was silent for a minute or two, busied, apparently, in selecting the best from a great bush of late-flowering white roses. The dinner-party was to come off this evening, and it was the Miss Prescott's pride that their table should always be well set off with flowers.

"What's the programme for to-day, Di?" Nellie asked abruptly at last. "As Charlie will be out, you won't be able to sit and look soft nothings at each other all day, so I may have a chance of your society. Shall we go for a drive?"

"Yes," Di replied, "we'll go round and order Pet in now."

"And drive into Coulston for some blue sarcenet ribbon without an edge; that's the only thing to wear round the throat now."

"I don't see well how we're to manage Coulston to-day," Di replied, reflectively.

"Oh, Di! only seven miles. What nonsense, when that lazy little wretch, Pet, has scarcely done any work lately."

"It's not Pet I'm thinking of," Miss Prescott replied, laughing. "I promised that we would take them their luncheon at one."

"Very well; I'll give up my blue ribbon. Did you promise Henry or Jack?"

"Neither; I told Charlie."

"Does he really know so much of our country manners and customs as to know that we take food to mighty hunters?"

"Of course he does. Don't you take to laughing at him for not being a combination of Nimrod and centaur, Miss Nellie; he does not go in for that style of thing."

"No; I know — competitive examinations, and silver-grey gloves, and a generally diffused air of sweet belief in all that's non-official being a little outside his

interest. Now, Di, don't be savage. I like him very much. I'd fall in love with him, perhaps, and get him to break his engagement if it were any one but you going to marry him. But still he is a little proud, now isn't he?"

"How?"

"Well, wasn't he a little grand just now about Jack Markham, after Jack had been so jolly to him, too; it's ungrateful. And now look at him; he is being grand to mamma, at the door; I can see he is."

"Well, don't you account for him as well as myself," Di said, in a vexed tone. "Mamma is most likely telling him of the iniquitous practices of the dairymaid with regard to the cream. He'll take a frantic interest in the cream and the chickens when he knows more about them, very likely."

Then the two girls went forward, as all the men assembled at the door, and told them that luncheon should be brought to them at one, on a wooden mound called the Fox Cover, that bulged out of one side of a turnip field.

"That's something to look forward to," Charlie whispered to Di. "They'll find me so utterly ignorant of all their intensely interesting topics, that I shall be condemned to silence till you come."

"Then it will be your own fault," Di said, sadly. Then she waxed a little cross as the recollection of what Nellie had been saying respecting Charlie's "grandness" swept over her mind, and she added—

"I suppose you would be more at home, and better able to follow the interest, if you were in the square playing croquet, and looking at Alice Leslie's pretty feet."

"With you in this vein, yes," he replied; and so they parted.

Miss Prescott had plenty of time to recover her temper before one o'clock. She set about doing it very sensibly. First, she helped her sister to arrange the vases for the dinner-table; and the communion

with flowers is sure to exorcise the worst demons that can possibly have possession of a girl like Di. Then she dressed herself carefully—"deliciously," Nellie called it—putting on a dress that would not look crumpled when she got out of the little pony phæton, and bringing out all the points of the same with a correctly contrasting belt (that showed off her *petite* figure well) and the narrowest and whitest of linen collars and cuffs.

"There's something too dogmatic about your hat, dear," her sister said to her when she was ready at last. "A little sailor's hat is all very well by the sea; but I have something sweet in black velvet Glengarrys. Will you wear it?"

Yes, Di thought she would wear it. And so she did wear it, and looked so well in it, that when she drove up to the group of angry men at one o'clock, even her brothers were struck afresh with the charm of the brilliant, blooming face that the black velvet framed so becomingly.

"It was a noble thing of me to do, for the cap's mine," Nellie said, when Jack Markham spoke of its "effect on her sister" to her, "and I look quite as well in it, I assure you; but I haven't a lover in the field, you see."

And Jack, feeling himself called upon to say something, said he "wasn't so sure of that."

It was a very "jolly luncheon," they all agreed, so "jolly" that the two men who were not related to the young ladies who had served it were in no hurry to get up and go after the partridges again. The dry warmth in the bright, clear September air—the crisp rustle of the light breeze through the trees that waved above them—the open, free unconventionality of the whole arrangement, brought them nearer together than they would have got in a month in a drawing-room.

"Somebody said somebody else sang," Charlie Carew said, at last. "Is it you, Di?"

"Yes," Di replied, "I'll sing presently." Then she wished to be gracious to Jack, and added, "Do you remember last year, when we brought you luncheon one day, how we all sang away the whole afternoon?"

"Yes," he remembered it.

"Ah! try that song that you sang then, will you, Jack?" Henry Prescott asked. He was very anxious that his friend should shine before his future brother-in-law. "It will be in character, for there's a 'mill going round' yonder, and you must often have met Di—I mean we have often all of us met here."

"Do persuade him to sing the applicable ditty," Charlie Carew said, half smiling, to Nellie; and she answered, "So I will," and turned to Jack with a request, for it worded in such a way that he could not, or did not, refuse, but began at once:—

"I wait alone where once we met,
And I see the mill go round;
And in fancy I almost hear it yet,
That once familiar sound.
It is hard to love on, as I loved you then,
And to know you are lost to me;
It is hard to linger, and linger again,
Alone by our trysting tree.
I hear the sound of a horse's hoof;
Come on, my rider gay!
O Fate! a cruel weft and woof,
Have you wove since the other day!

"The mill goes round, and the river flows,
And the sun shines—that's so strange,
Just as though they none of them saw my woes,
Just as though there had been no change,
But I wait alone where once we met,
Where we swore to be fond and true,
Where we vowed that we never would forget,
I wait alone—for you.
In vain I list for the horse's hoof!
Sigh in vain for the rider gay!
O Fate! a cruel weft and woof,
Have you wove since the other day."

The singer's voice failed him a little in the last line, and when he finished silence sat like a cloud over them for a minute, then it was broken.

CHAPTER III.

IN HONOUR OF CHARLIE.

THERE was not much of an echo about the Fox-cover; but what there was suffered to prolong the last notes of Jack Markham's voice without interruption. When it had quite died away, Di, with a little difficulty and a little consciousness, spoke—

"Thanks, Mr. Markham; how well your voice filled this space; didn't it, Charlie?"

"Wonderfully," Mr. Carew replied, with the carelessness that is more offensive when united to warm words than to cool ones.

"Can you sing, Charlie?" the younger sister asked, abruptly. And he shrugged his shoulders, and said, "Oh, no," as if singing and he might never be named together on any terms.

"But you half promised," Di said, coaxingly; "do try, Charlie." The pleader was so lovely and so loving, that Mr. Carew could not be very much disgusted with the impracticability of the female mind, which could lead a girl to ask a man who couldn't "to try to sing," in these days of vocal perfection.

"Why mar such perfect harmony as there is in this scene and atmosphere by making a row?" he whispered to Miss Prescott. "Let those fellows go on drinking sherry and destroying sound, and you two girls come for a stroll with me."

"Very well," Di acquiesced. She would have liked it better had he suggested that she should accompany him in the stroll without her sister. But, it was kind to Nellie, at any rate, to include her in the plan; so Di rose in response, blithely making the best of it.

"Ah, this is good!" Mr Carew exclaimed, as with his two companions he got out of earshot of the two Prescotts and Jack Markham. "I declare to you, Di, it's the first moment I have breathed freely to-day."

"Is it? I am sorry you should have had a sense of suffocation," Nellie replied for her sister.

He laughed good-temperedly. He knew the girl was quietly laughing at him, and thinking him "fine;" but this was a charge that he had not the smallest objection to being made against him.

"It was just that, Nellie, 'a sense of suffocation,' as you beautifully express it. What else could I have had, I ask you, while dragging through turnips, listening to jokes of the land, which those fellows made to each other, or while Mr. Jack Markham mildly reproached Di in song about the 'other day?'"

"Poor Jack!" Di muttered, softly.

"Poor Jack!" Nellie struck in, vigorously. "Dear Jack, I say. I wish I could console him, Mr. Charlie Carew; he's worth any number of you that could be given."

"Happily for me, Di didn't think so."

"No; Di's a goose—no rule for me," the girl replied, laughing. "Now, Di, don't look as if you thought me a rare combination of all the most displeasing qualities. I only meant to show my very high appreciation of Jack by comparing him to Charlie; and if I had not grossly exaggerated in my comparison, you'd have said it was not meet they should be so much as named together. Now, gallant so gay, sit down and tell me whether you have anything better worth looking at than this in the Strand."

"No, indeed," he said, heartily, as he seated himself; and no indeed was the very truth.

Small as the space they had traversed from the spot where they had had luncheon was in reality, it was very far in seeming; for the face of the land—or rather its expression—was utterly changed. They had left the knoll called the Fox-cover, and the wide slope of turnip-field behind them to the right, and had turned a corner into a wooded meadow, through which a river ran, between banks that were trimmed with alder and aspen trees. There was a twin-meadow

opposite to them, over the stream, whose bright damp green threw into high relief several groups of dark-red Devons and compactly built black Scots. Behind these, a background of wood rose in a gentle slope—a wood with the memory of summer's bright days still about it in emerald tints, but with still more of autumn's rich perfection—of tawny browns, and those even ruddier hues—those fuller splendours that nature lavishes when the year is dying royally in crimson and gold.

It was a very fair scene; and Charlie Carew felt all the fairness of it more fully, perhaps, than either of his companions. To them it lacked that charm of freshness—of dissimilitude to the scenes through which his daily path lay—which it had for him. The quiet, clear river, creeping along between its luxuriant banks, slowly, as though it were loath to leave what was so fair, even for what might be fairer; the gentle breathing of the breeze through the aspen boughs; the light shiver it made over the water; the reflections in the latter of sky and foliage, each idealized in some mysterious way; the hush that was over all the world, as it seemed; that tone of crispness which, however bright the sun, a September day in England never lacks; the mingling of beauty and purity, of peace and elasticity,—made place and hour alike, for Charlie Carew, things never to be forgotten.

"By Jove! a fellow might do something with his life here, if he only had the time," he exclaimed, after a long pause, during which Di had been hoping that he wasn't bored, and Nellie that he was, in order that she might chaff him out of the frame of mind at the first fitting opportunity. "It seems to me that it would be just the place where you would have plenty of time to do what you willed with your life. No theatres, and no balls, and no clubs, and no——"

"Croquet parties," Di interrupted.

"No croquet parties! Oh, indeed! I fancied you had told me you played a good deal about here," Mr. Carew said, carelessly.

"So we do; I ought to have said, no Ladbrook Square, or Alice Leslie."

"Which speech would have made me regret her, if nothing else would," he replied, coldly. And then Nellie saw that all was not quite well with the lovers, and judged it better to leave them, saying she "would go back and fetch up those other lazy boys, if they did not mean to shoot any more."

Like every woman who gives vent to a small burst of jealousy, Di Prescott had put herself into the wrong place. It was small, and she knew it to be small; and, harder still, she knew that he considered it small.

"Oh, dear, dear!" she thought, "why did I ever recall that horrid girl, with her pretty feet and her graceful ways, to his mind?" Then she remembered how admirably the Leslies always catered for his entertainment; how well they got up little dinners for him; how particular they were not to have the inevitable bores that are in every circle on the evenings when he was coming; how careful about his coffee, and considerate about the quality of the strains that were sung in his ears in their drawing-room. She remembered all these things, having had a good look behind the scenes during her six weeks' sojourn with them; and she also remembered the dinner-party that was to come off that evening at her mother's house, and trembled for its effect on him.

"Dear Charlie!" she said, softly, developing a sudden humility in her agitation and doubt, that was most agreeable to Mr. Carew; "dear Charlie! how good you are to find things smoother than they really are down here, for my sake: I know what a change it must be for you."

"This part of it is jolly enough," he replied, affectionately taking her hand and placing it on his arm. "I should like nothing better than for this sort of business to last, Di."

"While the weather stayed fine," she laughed;

"and if you had a very capital, well-appointed house to go home to when it gets near dinner time."

"All that goes without saying," he replied; "the well-appointed house must be mine, wherever I am; and whenever I settle, poverty, discomfort, and I, wouldn't long be occupants of the same house."

"Poverty is all relative," Di was beginning, when he interrupted her to say—

"My dear girl, so are most things." Then he laughed, and added that, though it might be true that man wanted but little here below, nor wanted that little long, still, for his part, he would like to have it remarkably good. And then poor Di had a qualm of fear as to the possibility of his being a little worldly, superadded to some others.

After a time—and the time passed very quickly in that clear, bright, vigorous air, on that sweet spot where only the water reflected,—it was borne in upon Di's mind that they had better look for the pony-carriage and go home to dress for dinner.

"We are to dine at half-past six instead of six, to-day, Charlie," she said at last, rising up; "we must go back to the Fox-cover, because of Pet and Nellie."

"I feel very much more inclined to stay here," Charlie replied, languidly, stretching himself at greater length upon the grass; "it's an awful nuisance to get up and go in from this to the certainty of being bored."

"Really I hardly know what to say or what to leave unsaid," the girl answered, rather sadly; "you place me in a peculiarly painful position; if you have no feeling against doing this yourself, I can scarcely hope to influence you."

He jumped up at once. "You are a darling," he exclaimed, his face flushing as he spoke. "I half feared you would pout and try to say sharp things, and by Jove I couldn't have answered for myself if you had; but nothing sweeter ever exorcised a devil out of a man than that look of yours just now. But,

darling, this is your time—to please you I'll lay myself out to amuse your mother's guests, tell them anecdotes even."

She laughed. "I won't ask such a sacrifice, only don't make fun, and don't be too fine, as Nellie calls it: and oh, Charlie, if you and my brothers could like each other a little, just for my sake."

"For your sake who would not promise even harder things? In return, don't let that fellow sing his sentimental twaddle, and stumble over melodious allusions to what may or may not be the rallying points of both your memories concerning the 'other day.'"

"Now, Charlie," she released her hand from his arm as they walked, and carried herself more erectly and firmly at once,—"now, Charlie, understand, all that you tell me to do that's right I'll do; but I will not cut an old friend for nothing."

"I don't ask you to cut him."

"I don't mean to 'cut,' in your sense of the word; I mean that I can't cut one of the kindest hearts in the world; not listen to him whenever he sings and whenever he speaks; can't you trust me to do it, Charlie?"

"Trust you; I should have rather a poor opinion of myself if I couldn't trust you with him, or a dozen like him."

"I don't believe that there are a dozen to be found like him," she replied, injudiciously, "he may not be polished or clever, particularly clever that is, but he is true and generous in every way; generous in act and generous in thought."

"I give him up to you with all his merits, Di; don't expect me to admire him, that's all; he's not in my line; where is your sister?"

"Gone home with the boys, I suppose," Di replied, quietly. She was feeling very much subdued, too much so for the beauty of the dying day to make any appeal to her taste. "I shall really be glad to get into the

gig and have a rest," she said wearily, as they came up to where Pet was tethered.

It was a quarter past six when they reached home; some of their guests had already arrived, and Mrs. Prescott was wafting anxiously about the house, making fervent inquiries of people who were not at all in a position to give her reliable information as to the whereabouts of Mr. Carew and her eldest daughter. Nellie was dressed, quite ready for and equal to the task of entertaining the assembled guests as well as they would be entertained before dinner. But Nellie was not the pride of her heart—her recently-engaged daughter.

"Where can Di be?" Mrs. Prescott asked for the fiftieth time, with a sort of ever-fresh interrogatory air of Nellie;" and Nellie made precisely the same answer she had given an hour before on first entering the house.

"Well, mamma, I left her up in the old meadow with Charlie; where she may be now it is impossible to say."

At length poor Mrs. Prescott got plaintive. "Di should not be so thoughtless," she murmured to her two sons and Nellie in succession; "she can dress quickly, but there's Mr. Carew, with all those studs, and Tom and Flora have been here an hour."

"Their own fault for coming so early," Nellie rejoined lightly; "however, here they come, whipping up Pet as if it was all his fault, poor little fellow; so ease your mind, mother."

But Mrs. Prescott's mind would not submit to being eased until she had been out into the hall to welcome and offer them such aids to speedy dressing as suggested themselves to her mind.

"Now look here, Mr. Carew," the kind old lady began, eagerly, "you haven't much time to spare, cook being punctual to a fault, as I sometimes say; still a glass of sherry with an egg beaten up you know wouldn't take a minute."

"My dear madam, before dinner, no, thank you."

"What, not after your hard day's walking—now do, or a nice cup of coffee; it's made all ready for the evening."

Charlie Carew groaned in spirit. "Precious stuff it will be when a fellow has to take it," he thought; but he only said aloud, "No, thanks; but if I could have some bitters I should——"

"I've the very thing for you," the mistress of the mansion said, energetically, "it shall be sent up to your room directly." And then Mr. Charlie Carew did manage to get himself away to dress.

It did come to him directly, and then he was ungrateful enough to find it unfit to drink. When he had signified his desire for "bitters," he had no idea that he would be offered a decoction of Seville orange-peel in sweet sherry as a substitute, and he did not approve of it. He tasted it and put it down with an unmistakeable expression of face—an expression that was unmistakeable even to the rather obtuse mind of the more than rather ancient handmaiden who had brought him the draught. When he was left alone, he went on dressing and grumbling to himself, and so did not make much way with his toilet, and had to be summoned finally, which put him further out of temper, and was altogether in an ill frame of mind when he did go down to the dinner that was given in his honour.

Why would these people give festivities for him? He asked himself the question with a groan almost, when he was led to the slaughter by Miss Price, to whom he was handed over as soon as he entered the drawing-room. "Charlie, I want to introduce you to my particular friend, Miss Price," Di whispered to him; and he bowed a graceful assent to the request, and wished finally that he had been born in that advanced period when a man's engaging himself to a girl shall not mean that he engages himself to all her kith and kin.

It need scarcely be said that he did not like Miss Price. She was a fine, fair girl, with a large expanse of white neck and shoulder, unbecomingly outlined by a badly-cut low muslin dress. She was a volatile young lady, too—a girl who was said to have "such spirits" by her friends, and who was denominated a "regular brick" by her brother, whose house she kept very much to their mutual satisfaction. She was, in fact, rather loud and rather fast, and she was indisputably not pretty nor well bred enough to be either with impunity.

On the present occasion she had come over to dine at the Prescotts' in a way of which Mr. Carew, the rather conventional, could not at all approve. "Shall we have a good moon to-night, Mr. Carew?" she asked, as soon as they were seated at the table; and when he rather languidly replied he "didn't know, the moon never interested him in England," she went on to say—

"Ah! but it does me, you see; for in the first place I have never been out of England, and in the second place, I am going home tandem to-night."

"Going home, I beg your pardon, *how?*"

"Tandem," she replied, laughing. "Tom wanted to try a new leader; he's always impatient, so he said he would drive me over or not come himself at all. I preferred his company, and risked a spill."

Charlie Carew sipped his wine; Di's particular friend rather took his breath away.

"What do you think of Jack Markham?" the young lady went on; "he's our great card about here, you must know."

"Seems a very nice fellow," Charlie replied, loftily.

"Yes, he is, and isn't he handsome, Mr. Carew? I never saw such eyes in my life. Then he does ride so. Oh! I can tell you Di has been very much envied and very much wondered at."

"Indeed," he said, stiffly.

"Yes, indeed. Now, just look at him; doesn't he

look well, talking to Nellie? I do hope he'll take a fancy to Nellie as he can't have Di," Miss Price went on, fervently, in touching unconsciousness of the keen desire Charlie had to strangle her.

"I see nothing but a blue-eyed booby," he said rather coldly. "You must forgive me for not giving your local hero a lofty place in my Pantheon at once, Miss Price; but I have had a great deal of him to-day, and I am rather tired."

"What did he do to tire you?" Miss Price asked, bluntly.

"He did a great deal, not to tire me, of course; looking back upon the day it seems to be all Mr. Jack Markham's shooting and singing; he did both delightfully, of course: still I am tired."

"What did he sing?" the girl asked, eagerly.

"Something about the 'other day,' nothing very thrilling or remarkable, and with some uncommonly difficult words to enunciate at the end of each verse."

"Ah, I know, 'warp and woof;' they are hard to sing, but it's a pretty thing. Jack wrote and composed it himself. I remember the day he did it, too."

"Pray, favour me with the reminiscence," Charlie asked, politely.

"Well, there is no harm in my mentioning it, because if Di hasn't told you she will tell you, or I wouldn't peach. You know he liked Di very much, and once they seemed to be very good friends, oh! for a long time; then, all of a sudden, Di altered. I suppose it was when she found he wanted to be more than an old friend, you know. And just after she *had* altered I was here with her one day, and we took them out their luncheon (as Di and Nellie did you to-day), and we got singing after it, and he made up those lines, and I do say they're clever."

Meanwhile an equally interesting conversation was being carried on between Di and Jack Markham. It had fallen to that gentleman's lot to take Miss Pres-

cott in to dinner, and in his honest, jolly way, he was very happy in his lot, and very desirous of proving to himself whether Di had satisfaction in it also, or whether she simply looked upon it as an infliction, temporary as it was.

"It was like old times to see you in the field to-day," he said presently.

"Yes, quite, wasn't it?" she replied, without much thought. She was occupied in admiring Charlie's style, and Charlie's graceful, nonchalant manner of eating a dinner that had been subject of solemn consideration with her mother for some days.

"And yet not quite like old times, was it?" Jack went on, with his face flushing a little, and his voice shaking; "it was queer to me at first to hear him speaking to you as Di, and to think he is going to take you away from us all. When is it to be?"

"I really can hardly say, Jack," the girl replied, nervously.

"Will you promise to tell me yourself when it is to be? I would rather hear it from you than from any one else. I'd rather you should *see* what I shan't be able to help showing than any one else."

"Jack!" she murmured, deprecatingly, almost piteously.

"Yes, you know it will be a sharp blow for me," he continued; "but you would not have dealt it if you could have helped it, I know that; and it isn't so bad as it would have been if he were not a good fellow; but he is a good fellow, I'm sure of that."

"A good fellow!" The praise was so very mediocre when applied to such perfection, Di had to summon up all her long-suffering with regard to Jack Markham before she could answer calmly—

"Indeed he is, Jack, everything that every one can desire. The Leslies know him well, and they thought no one on earth like him; that is to say," she added with a laugh, "they thought so until he was engaged to me; now they think less of him."

"I remember Miss Leslie staying with you once, a pretty little girl," Jack replied.

"She's a pretty big girl now, tall, with a wonderfully good figure. You should hear"—she paused, and then made a little effort of generosity, and added, "you should hear Mr. Carew talk about her feet when she's playing croquet."

"Is she coming to see you at all this year?"

"She has promised to be one of my bridesmaids," Di answered. "Now, Jack, take my advice, and see a good deal of her while she is here; if you do you won't be able to help liking her, and then she won't be able to help liking you."

"That did not follow in another case," he said, meaningly; and she laughed and shook her head, and said—

"You had been like a dear brother to me so long that I'm not to be cited. Alice has ten times my sense."

"How shall you like living in London?" Jack asked, irrelevantly.

"Oh! very much, I fancy—anywhere with Charlie," Di answered, ruthlessly.

"You'll find it a great change."

"Of course I shall. You're like mamma; she tells me constantly that I shall not have fresh eggs and unlimited supplies of cream and home-made bread; as if I lived on those things and never ate anything else. And another grievous deprivation she has in store for me. I shall have no lavender out of my own garden to dry and put in my drawers. It never occurs to her that I may buy some ready cut in Covent Garden, or that I mayn't, as I hate it."

He smiled. "You'll miss other things more than eggs and lavender, Di. You'll miss your friends."

"I shall see them always," the girl answered, hurriedly. "London is not Central Africa."

"Not always, or often even, Di, unless I'm very much mistaken. No, we must make up our minds to lose you when you marry."

"That's simply absurd," she replied. "I shall always be glad to see my friends; it's unkind of you to throw a doubt on the subject."

But though she said this firmly, she did not feel by any means sure that Charlie Carew would be glad to see her friends; and it did occur to her that unless he displayed some such feeling, her friends would very seldom give him an opportunity of seeing them.

Mr. Carew was the first to rejoin the ladies. He had not exactly held aloof from the other men, but he had not mixed well with them. He knew by intuition that they were not free of his topics, and he scorned theirs, or rather scorned their manner of dealing with them. Jack Markham was the most unendurable to the young official, for he (Jack) not only had opinions about many things, but he gave them out when it seemed good to him to do so, and this Charlie could hardly tolerate in a man who had barely been beyond the border of his own county.

"Your Mr. Jack Markham has been good enough to treat us to an essay on art, art as seen at the Royal Academy," Charlie said, sauntering up to Di, and she replied—

"Has he? I'll get him to show you his pictures some day, if you're good."

CHAPTER IV.

MISS LESLIE.

AFTER that dinner-party Henry Prescott refused with decision to second any further attempts to amuse Mr. Carew which his mother felt disposed to make. "Take my advice and leave him to Di," he would reply, when Mrs. Prescott, out of the goodness of her heart, would plan wild schemes of dissipation, in the which she designed that the Admiralty clerk should participate.

Perhaps, too, he derived a little consolation from the fact of Mr. Charles Carew being on the verge of departing; for though Jack had magnanimously kept to his resolve of not making it unpleasant to Di by keeping away from them while Charlie was there, Jack had sometimes found that his complacency caused him a smart. Miss Prescott made efforts to be kind to him, made efforts to cover her lover's coolness to him, and, with true love-keenness, these efforts were very apparent to the man for whom they were made.

At last the day arrived for Mr. Carew to take his leave of the Prescotts, and return to his duties at the Admiralty. On the whole it must be acknowledged that he was not altogether sorry to go. Several things had jarred upon an organisation that he had for several years been sedulously striving to render superfine. There was too much roughness in the manners of Di's brothers—too much familiarity in the manner of her friend Mr. Markham, and too great a prolixity about the conversation of her mother, for Charlie's taste to pass through the ordeal of that time amongst them all unwounded. He had been very much fascinated with Di when he saw her first in the midst of the Leslies, to whom he was well used. He was very fond of her still. Nevertheless, he was fain to confess to himself that it would perhaps have been more discreet had he "waited to know more," not of her, but "of her people," before he pledged himself.

But no trace of this half feeling made itself manifest in his manner when he was exchanging the last good-byes with Di, as she drove him to the station. His "Good-bye, my own darling!" had the genuine ring of the metal about it, and the clasp of his slender, strong, white warm hand was very reassuring.

"You will come again soon, Charlie? You'll show me that the time hasn't been very heavy to you by coming again soon, won't you?" she said, bending out of the pony-carriage for one more shake of the hand—one last farewell. And she looked so pretty as she

asked it, with that black velvet Glengarry coming well over her white, straight brow—with the shimmer of tender feeling over her softened eyes, and the rose on her cheek heightened by agitation; she looked so pretty and well-bred—there was such a caressing touch in that small, well-gloved hand of hers, that Charlie Carew felt she was all his wife need be, and promised to come again as cordially as she asked him.

"Ah! there's one thing I've forgotten to say, Di," he cried, running back to her after the train had puffed up, and risking losing it—"there's one thing more I have forgotten to say—wouldn't it be well to ask one of the Leslies down here? civil after——"

"All their civility to me," she interrupted. "Yes, I think it would—I'll do it; shall it be Alice?"

"As you like—yes, Alice; there's the train off, by Jove!" Then he started off, catching the train cleverly, and committing Di to the fulfilment of a plan that was very abhorrent to her—why she hardly knew.

However, she had promised Charlie—promised him at parting, too; so she could but moot the project to her mother, hope that all things would arrange themselves agreeably, and that Alice Leslie's visit would be productive of happiness to everybody. There was no gainsaying facts. They had been very kind to her, and she had been very happy with them at Bayswater. The least she could do for Charlie Carew's friend was to be civil and hospitable and kind to her in return.

It was late in the autumn when Miss Leslie reached the Prescotts'—just that pleasant season which ladies declare with emphasis to "be so very difficult to dress"—a difficulty they meet by tempering the coming breath of winter in a variety of ways that are not justified by the extreme seasons. Alice Leslie was an adept in the art of dress. She never missed an opportunity of making a picturesque effect. A little white cloth jacket, with big pockets and mother-of-pearl buttons all over it, would have been too cold for winter in appearance and too warm for summer in reality, but it

was the very thing for the crisp, late October days. So with a petticoat where bands of red peeped out between the scallops of her looped-up shepherd's plaid silk or golden brown velveteen dress—so with the neat, trim little black velvet hat, with a band of grebe round its brim—she was a charming object in this costume, walking about the lawn and fields, exchanging affectionate confidences with her friend Di Prescott.

A very charming object. For she was not only young and picturesque, but she was very pretty too. Pretty with the beauty of blue eyes and black lashes and brows, and lovely nut-brown hair of that fluffy, wavy sort, that always arranges itself so well between fillets of ribbon. Miss Alice brought such a stock of these latter with her, that she quite bewildered Nellie Prescott, who could not make up her mind as to the relative merits of the violet, the blue, the green, or the rose-coloured bands with which Alice tied up her nut-brown tresses. The quiet toilettes that had been by way of being gay before, paled before the brilliancy of colouring in which Miss Leslie indulged with impunity. Gay as she was she never looked too gay. Yet were the ribbons, and the white cloth jacket, and the bright-hued little cravats rashly bestowed on any other, that other seemed to flame, and confusion came of it.

She made herself very agreeable to the whole family —all of whom, save Di, were nearly strangers to her. The alliance between Miss Leslie and Miss Prescott had been formed at school, where Mrs. Prescott had seen Alice once or twice on occasions of going to fetch Di home. But to the "boys," as Di called her brothers, Miss Leslie was an utter stranger, and they were much dazzled by her—as "it became them to be," the London belle simply thought.

She took up the tone of delighting in the country and all that made up life in the same, with a delicate tact, that made it seem a very spontaneous, perfectly bewitching thing to "the boys." She "liked roughing it," she assured them. "Liked roughing it!" that

dainty creature, to whom the crumpling of a rose-leaf might have been supposed to be a serious inconvenience. It was a most graceful condescension on her part, Henry Prescott felt, when Miss Leslie rode his hunter, or suffered him to drive her about in a high, fast-looking dog-cart. It seemed to him that she stepped down from her high estate of delicate gracefulness and beauty in doing these things—she! a woman who was specially designed to lounge in a curve in a low-sloping carriage, and be drawn through the higher haunts of the world! A most graceful condescension! made for him.

The beauty with the blue eyes and the black brows and lashes spoke with a most girlish and engaging frankness of her "friendship for Mr. Carew." She advanced to meet Di's unacknowledged dreads and suspicions in a way that sometimes quite, and always nearly dispersed them. "I think I was almost jealous at first," she would say to Miss Prescott, when they were alone together; "not that I wanted him myself, but I didn't want any one else to have him."

Then, in reply to this, Di, with the polite perfidy of woman, would say, "There is no doubt that if you had wanted him yourself you would have had him; I couldn't stand against you, Alice."

"Now do you think that I believe you think that? Well, anyway, I don't envy you any more: this life is far too jolly for any one in her senses to leave it for a life in London with Charlie Carew."

"You say so because it's new to you. You would soon get bored down here when the first flush of novelty had gone off."

"Never—never—never."

"Oh, yes, you would. Why, you regard a week without one ball and several gatherings of some sort as a blank altogether."

"Ah! that's the atmosphere. I can't help wanting to participate in gaiety when I'm in the midst of the sound of it; but down here I don't hear of it, and so

I don't want it. I wish I never had to leave down here."

"I wonder if she would marry Henry," Di thought, after this conversation with her friend. "He's very much taken with her, and she seems to like to be with him, and to find pleasure in studying his tastes; but then that *is* Alice; she prides herself upon her tact."

Meanwhile the fame of his sister's friend spread abroad through their circle, and Henry Prescott was very proud of his guest. Inquiries, direct or surreptitious, were always being made about her, and it flattered him that he should be the temporary guardian of such a celebrity. To be the permanent one was a bewildering dream of bliss in which he dared not indulge.

As for Alice Leslie, she merely obeyed the gay fancy of the moment, and did, and said, and looked just as it bid her, without a thought of an after part. It was very pleasant to the pretty, vivacious, fashionable girl, who was only one of many such up in her own set, to come down and put out the paler local lights, and be the one bright particular star and win all the honest hearts, that showed her too clearly, she could do so "an only she willed it." Pleasant to play at having pastoral tastes, at delighting in fair scenery, at roving the woods, and finding the fields and brooklets, and the simple society of a few chosen friends "sufficient to her." She knew that when the first note of winter festivity was sounded in her own *coterie* that she could leave all these without a regret, and go back with new roses on her cheek, to the old fields where fresh conquests awaited her. It pleased her to think that they would all talk of her down here along after she had left them and they had drifted from her mind; talk of her and quote her sayings, and cite her dresses, and generally tell and retell the tale of her sojourn and successes amongst them. It was very much better than the sea-side, where she had spent the latter part of the summer. There she was subjected to the same set as

in town to a degree that forbade all hope of their having anything fresh to say to each other when they met again in the winter. But here she was the stranger, the queen of hearts, the altar on which all sighed to lay their attentions. It was one little round of triumph to her from the moment she came down to breakfast, and was met by one brother with a flower, and the intelligence that the other had gone to meet the postboy, in order that she might have her letters the sooner, till the hour came for retiring, when all fought for the "barren honour" of presenting her with her candlestick.

She was a sight, walking along the little village, capitally costumed, with the brothers, one on either side of her, each jealously regarding each word or glance of hers. "The cub" was getting his first lesson in the pleasure and the pain of loving from Miss Leslie. She took a safe tone with him, safe as far as she was herself concerned, that is, calling him a boy, and at the same time flattering him into a very unboyish heartache. He began to hate Henry for those years of seniority which made Alice refrain from taking that maddening elder sister's tone with him which she occasionally adopted when "the cub" dared to be too sentimental.

And she was a spectacle on Sundays, a spectacle that sometimes upset the curate, who was young and tender, like "Little Billee," causing him to wish that he had more than seventy pounds a year. Her little straight throat and small head were the very things to make that "lily bend"—which is so becomingly suggestive of devotional feeling—an easy thing for her to accomplish. Her little prayer-book with the broad silver cross upon it, held in her little silver-grey kid-gloved hands; the tender-looking grebe collarette into which she nestled her round white chin; the sweet thrill of the voice that broke in and harmonised the inharmonious congregational singing; the way in which she half swept, half glided down the aisle, a sort

of pious young sovereign—all these made her an unforgotten thing in that village for many a long day.

Only Jack Markham refused to bend the knee to her. "Di's worth a thousand of her any day that can be named," he said, contemptuously, after listening to Henry Prescott's earliest ebullitions of feeling respecting her. "She's a good-looking girl enough, but take the wave out of her hair and the ribbons off her head, or do away with that hat and jacket, and those wonderful Balmorals, and Miss Alice Leslie wouldn't be such a great beauty, you'd see."

But Henry refused to believe that he should see anything of the kind. "Everything becomes her best—she makes defect perfection," he said, gravely, his love developing that vein of poetry which is in most of us, whether it ever be brought out or not; "she'd adorn a palace or a cottage equally well."

"Whew-w," Jack Markham whistled slowly; "the wind sets in that quarter, does it? Now look here, old fellow, we neither of us know about palaces from personal experience; but take my word for it, if you tried her in a cottage, you would have a taste of her temper that would make you like her less."

Jack Markham was not the only one who was guilty of the weakness of speaking a word in season to a man in love. Di was very fond of her brother, fond of him and proud of him in a certain way. She esteemed him for his fine sense of honour, for that perfect integrity which not only kept him invariably from seeming the thing he was not, but even more, made him on all occasions seem the thing he was. She admired him for his daring and skill in the field and chase, for his good looks and good temper, for his manliness and courage and strength. She loved him warmly, as sisters do love brothers who pet and protect them. But withal she did not deceive herself about him, and she knew that he was not cast in the mould that would find favour in Alice Leslie's eyes. It was hard for Di to word the truth even to herself,

but she could not blind herself to its being the truth. Henry had not the amount of education and cultivation which is deemed essential by even superficial young ladies who have been made free of current literature.

It was hard to word the truth to herself, and still harder to hint the same to her brother. But Di did it gallantly at last, feeling strongly that it behoved her to avert from him any pain that might be averted, since she had brought this Alice Leslie upon him. So she took the opportunity of doing so one day when it was raining, and Alice, "bored and hipped" (and rather cross, truth to tell), had gone upstairs to lie down on her couch, and make a little private moan as to the tediousness of a wet day in the country.

The steady pattering down of the drops upon the dejected-looking shrubs immediately outside the windows seemed to have a depressing effect upon the whole party. Mrs. Prescott had retired, having declared it to be a good day to go and "mend up" a lot of things in her bedroom. Nellie was employed in reviling the weather that prevented her driving over to the nearest town for more salmon-coloured wool wherewith to ground a gorgeous piece of worsted work, and in wandering about the room in very vagueness. Henry and Di were respectively trying to read, and failing, by reason of the former being nervously expectant of Miss Leslie's reappearance, and the latter being keenly alive to the fact; and "the cub" was irritably conscious that he was much marvelled at by his brother and sisters for staying in the house when he could have gone into the more congenial atmosphere of the stables. "Such the power of love." Willie had a horror, a horror such as can only possess a boy, of being laughed at; but he risked that misery rather than leave the place that might possibly be graced by Miss Leslie's presence.

At last Ellen broke a silence, which had lasted some time, by exclaiming,

"When is Alice coming down, Di? I wish she would make haste. I want to try that duet with her."

"Hadn't you better call her, Di?" Henry suggested. "I'm anxious to hear that song. Call her down."

Di laughed—"I thought you objected to music by daylight? Besides, Alice would not be grateful to me for disturbing her."

Henry relapsed into his book for a page or two; then he defended his musical taste against that charge which had been made of daylight killing it.

"I've said sometimes that I don't care to hear a constant strumming when I'm making up my accounts in the morning; but when we none of us have anything better to do, we may as well have some music."

"Especially if Alice Leslie will join us if we have some, and keep away from us if we haven't any; eh, Harry?" Ellen asked, laughing. "Now I will be a jewel of a sister. I'll go and get her down."

Di looked at her eldest brother as Ellen went out of the room, and she saw that he looked pleased, "foolishly pleased," she thought, considering all things. The colour came upon his brow as he met her glance, too. Altogether, the signs were sure and bad. The time for speaking had come.

"Poor Alice!" she said, leaning forward on her low seat with her book in her lap, and looking up with a pretty little confidential air into her brother's face. "Poor Alice; this has been a trying day for her—so wet."

"Trying day for anybody," he answered, seeing that he was expected to say something.

"Yes, but for her, particularly for her. She shrugged her shoulders at the woods and fields she has been saying such sweet things about, when she came down this morning, and said a wet season in their society would be rather crushing."

Henry looked interested for a moment; then an expression of "knowing more about it perhaps than Di

did" swept over his face, and Miss Prescott felt called upon to say a word or two more.

"She'll be a charming little woman of the world when she marries. I fancy I see her already the mistress of a capitally-appointed house in a good neighbourhood. Alice would be wretched unless she were close to the park, and had a neat little brougham, and a showy saddle-horse, and a swell groom, and a running account at Elise's. Charlie and I shall be in such a much more humble way that we shall not see much of her."

"She isn't married yet," Henry Prescott said, hoarsely. The picture his sister had conjured up was a horrible one for the poor fellow to contemplate. It was borne in upon his mind that he was loving not at all wisely, and a great deal too well.

"No, she's not married yet, as you say; but that's the way she will marry, or ought to marry, to be happy: it's her groove."

"She would be just as happy in another," Henry Prescott replied; and Di had only time to shake her head and say "No, no," before Miss Leslie and Ellen came into the room.

"Alice has come to sing to you, Harry," Ellen began at once. "She was sound asleep when I got up, and just a little cross when I woke her, but she forgave me soon when I told her what I wanted."

"Not cross, I'm sure," Henry Prescott whispered, as he started up to meet her; and Alice gave him a little flashing glance, and muttered quickly,

"You won't believe that of me, will you? Nellie wouldn't call me cross if she knew about a letter I've had to-day. Mamma says I must go home to-morrow."

She whispered all this standing near to Henry, looking up almost imploringly into his eyes.

"Go home to-morrow," he repeated; "oh! no you won't, Alice; I mean——"

"I fear I must," she said with a sigh, turning away.

Then she added, "Come, Di, come and sing away some of my sorrow, I have to leave you to-morrow, dear. Now don't speak, it won't bear talking about."

So she staggered them and puzzled them with her intentions and the abrupt announcement of her immediate departure, gracefully, and apparently excitedly, waving off all questioning on the subject. "Mamma had recalled her and she must go," she said. The truth was, she fancied that the dull and wet season had set in here, and that it would be livelier and more agreeable at Bayswater. So she determined to go away suddenly and be regretted.

She sang her tenderest songs in her tenderest tones to them that night. She put aside her gay brilliancy and substituted a soft air that was not sorrow exactly, but "that resembled sorrow as the mist resembles the rain." Looking at her, and listening to her as she warbled out metrical assertions to the effect that she would marry her own love, for true of heart was she, and others of a like order, Henry Prescott came to the conclusion that Di was much mistaken about her friend, and that the latter was peculiarly fitted by nature, habit, and education, to bless a country heart and adorn a country life. He remembered that—

> "He either fears his fate too much,
> Or his deserts are small,
> Who dares not put it to the touch,
> And win—or lose it all."

He would put his fate to the touch to-morrow before she left. But on the morrow his design was frustrated. Something intervened to delay Miss Leslie's departure, as shall presently be told.

CHAPTER V.

"ALMOST LIKE A BROTHER."

THE one thing in which Miss Leslie did not conform to the normal habits of her entertainers, was in the

matter of getting up early. It was the sole thing in which Henry Prescott could have desired to see her other than she was. And this, not from any moral objection to the morning languor that might develop into laziness, but because it prevented his enjoying the first fruits of her society. In vain he got into the way of being a long time over his breakfast and the previous day's paper. In vain he would loiter about in the yard for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour after the groom had led his horse out, and then go back to the house, fraught with some question that was imperative, as to being asked of his sisters long after they believed him to be well away on the farm. It was all in vain that he did these things day after day with apparently inexhaustible patience; Alice Leslie scarcely ever could prevail upon herself to get out of her room before eleven o'clock.

But this morning, the morning on which she had avowed that she must leave them, the sound of Miss Leslie's light step as she sprang along the passage and down the stairs made itself heard much earlier than usual. Ellen had carried the pet guest a cup of coffee and her letters shortly after the post-bag came in. Ellen had also communicated a piece of intelligence which Di had received.

"It's a pity you're going away to-day," the youngest Miss Prescott had said. "Di has heard from Charlie, and he's coming down to-morrow to stay for a week."

"Is he?" Alice replied, carelessly. "I'm glad I'm going though; Di would be lost to me as soon as he comes." Then she turned to her coffee and her correspondence; and Ellen left her, and went down to tell them that Alice would be down directly, for a wonder; and adding, to her brothers, "I suppose you will stop in, and see her this last morning, both of you—won't you?"

Alice came in presently, looking prettier than ever, both the boys thought, with a deeper rose-tint over her fair face than usual, and with her bright hair pushed

far off behind her ears, and rolling in crimped luxuriance behind. She was all that he had always felt sure she must be—all that a girl ought to be early in the morning, Henry Prescott thought, as he rose to meet her. Fresh and bright-hued in complexion, and dress faultlessly arrayed; perfect in all those delicate points of spotless collar and cuffs, and well-fitting shoes and waist-band—wafting into the room with the fragrance of rosewater, and the mere idea of some exquisitely-perfumed hair-wash about her—sparkling and fastidious and unexceptionably neat, without being too effervescent, fanciful, or fussily careful.

She came forward with a fluttering mass of open letters in her hand, and seated herself at the table, opposite to Henry, on the same side with Di, only separated from that young lady by Willie (to whom she was less of a novelty early in the day than to his elder brother—for Willie had devotedly disregarded the farm, and all appertaining thereto, during Miss Leslie's sojourn amongst them). As soon as she was seated she commenced speaking rapidly, and with a slight air of embarrassment, to Mrs. Prescott. But though her words were given to the old lady, her looks, when she raised them from the table, were bestowed on the eldest son.

"I hardly know how to tell you, Mrs. Prescott—you will think me so everlasting, and mamma so very changeable; but I've heard from her again this morning, and she says if you can have me a little longer she shall be very glad to let me stay."

"My dear! certainly—only too glad to have you," Mrs. Prescott replied, warmly; and Henry gave Alice a long grateful look, as she raised her eyes to his once more, which would have satisfied her as to his feelings, even if she had not fathomed them before.

"How very kind of your mamma," Di said.

"Merciful interposition of Providence on my behalf. I should have had no one to speak to, now Charlie Carew is coming," Nellie put in, laughing.

Henry waited to make his recognition of the prolongation of the favour of her society until Miss Leslie had breakfasted, and was loitering by herself in the bay window; then he came to her, and said—

"Are you very sorry that your mamma has extended your leave of absence? Can you stand us and our dull ways, so different to yours, Di says, a little longer —patiently?"

He spoke so tenderly that the soul of the coquette rose up and was eager for the fray. One scalp the more added to the collection she already had—what did it matter! A little meanness, a touch of falseness, a brief, well-acted lie, and the trick would be done! He was rather rough at present, a touch of love-sorrow would refine him, do him good, and perhaps cause him to be grateful to her for having brought "out his best" in the years to come. Any way, whether it did this or not, the opportunity of adding to the list of her triumphs was given, and she would not miss it. So she looked up into his face (it is such an easy part to play, this one of fond feeling—such an easy, false, effective, shameful part, and it always gets filled so readily)—looked up into his face and almost sighed, and almost checked it, and answered, with an accent of reproach—

"A little longer! patiently! Is that all you know of me?"

He would have given all his acres to have been able to speak then, and tell her how well he thought he knew her, and how dear the knowledge was to him—to have been able to make her understand how unspeakably precious each single hair of that glistening nut-brown mass was to him—how beyond all price was the hope her last words had given him. But he could not. In the eyes of the rest of the unbiassed world his own sisters would not have been found wanting in a single feminine grace or charm by the side of the glittering Alice. But in the eyes of Alice's lover she was peerless—as superior to his sisters as Hyperion to

a satyr. The intensity of the worship made the worshipper feel uncouth, unpolished, unworthy in every way. This delicate creature—this daintily-coloured, fragile piece of china! how could he—mere rough earthenware that he was—dare to try to place himself beside her?

So he stood quite quelled, quite silent before her, looking down upon the proudly-poised little head of the queen of his soul. And she averted her eyes, that he might not see the laughter that lived in them, as she realised some of the Omphale sensations, and knew her Hercules was fluttering between hope and despair. Then, it was no part of her plan to let her host speak while her stay in his house still seemed a desirable thing to her—she put an end to the period by saying—

"Now I'll go and unpack my boxes again, and enjoy the full luxury of feeling that I am going to stay a little longer. I shall not seem sure of it while my trunks are packed." With which speech she left him, feeling foolish, and happy, and unsettled, as he had never felt before.

And he had censured Di for going after strange gods, and not concentrating her affections on some local object! It was astonishing how leniently his love for Alice made him look upon his sister's choice.

Once more Di drove to the railway station to meet Charlie Carew, and this time there was no alloy to her happiness in meeting him, for he knew all there was to be known about her relations and surroundings. No alloy to her happiness?—She was almost sure that there was none—almost, but not quite sure, as she remembered how pretty Alice Leslie looked as she came out to the lawn gate to see her (Di) start.

Charlie had some very good news to tell her. He had just got his "second class," and would for the future be in receipt of a far better income than was his when he wooed and won Miss Prescott. He told her this at once, as soon as they got free of the station and

were bowling along the open country road—told her, in a hearty sort of sympathy way that was intensely gratifying. She felt that he was identifying her with his career—an ambition which is every woman's—when he spoke of this success to her as of a thing that intimately concerned them both.

Was there any alloy to the happiness of that brisk drive through that crisp early winter air? Was there any feeling that she wished she had not got it to tell when she began—

"Oh, Charlie! you know Alice Leslie is here, don't you?"

"Know she's here?—no I don't. Her mother told me the other day that she wanted Alice back at once. I thought, of course, she was gone."

"No; she was going this morning; but there came a letter from her mother, saying she might stay on. And, do you know, I think Harry is more than rather glad of the reprieve."

"What! Has Miss Alice been investing her idle time in beguiling him?" Charlie asked, laughing. "She can't let her powers lie fallow on any consideration."

"Come, Charlie," Di said, promptly resenting the implied slur upon her brother; "it would be a good match for Alice—one that she might well contemplate making without any stress of circumstance."

"Undoubtedly; nevertheless she won't contemplate making it," Charlie said, as they drew up at the entrance; and this time the Prescott family abstained from coming in procession to meet Mr. Charles Carew.

"The two other girls were gone out for a walk," Di heard, when she inquired after them. "Alice said she thought you would not want them," Mrs. Prescott said, significantly; and Di felt that Charlie did not like the manner significant being applied to him, and so answered more curtly than was usual with her—

"No, I don't want them; but they might have said

where they were going, and then we could have gone to meet them—couldn't we, Charlie?"

"Yes," Charlie replied, with unwelcome alacrity. "But, after all, some one can say which way they have gone; surely some one has seen them?"

"Impatient to see Alice," Di thought, dejectedly. "Oh dear! what had I better do, I wonder?—let things take their course, or try to regulate them?"

Poor Di! Thousands—tens of thousands of women have asked themselves this question, when some sign of the wavering allegiance has been shown to them; and each one would have done well to accept this truth—that for all the good gained by taking other means, it would be as well to let "things take their course."

Especially is it idle and vexatious, and altogether more worthless and void of good result than vanity itself, when the woman who fears desertion has given all the love she has to give, and not only given it, but shown him that she has done so. Satiety cannot well avoid setting in where too much sweetness reigns. He is very apt to love more, if she shows that she may love less, for

> "The heart of a man's like that delicate weed
> Which requires to be trampled on boldly indeed
> Ere it give forth the fragrance you wish to extract:
> 'Tis a simile, trust me, if not new, exact."

Now, Di was very fond of Mr. Carew, and she had shown all her fondness without fear. But she had plenty of sense, and plenty of pride, and a sound strong feeling that it would be useless to struggle against the inevitable. If he were inclined to admire her dazzling friend, more than in honour he ought to have done, no feeble holdings back on the path he wanted to take would effectually restrain him. So she wisely determined to be passive—to let "things take their course," and only to seek to ward off evil by making herself as attractive as possible.

She was much too sensible to scorn any of those adventitious aids of dress which are so powerful for

good or ill. Di knew very well that Charlie, who took the colour of his eyes and the tone of his hair and complexion into consideration whenever he bought a new cravat—whose gloves were always immaculate—who was always, in fact, so well dressed, that it was impossible to say what he wore; she knew that Charlie would not be lenient to her appearance falling short of Alice's in any way. Di did not deck herself in such daring bits of colour as did the brilliant, brown-haired girl who could wear any hue with impunity; but Charlie found her appearance very satisfactory when they started for their walk, and he marked the low easy fall of her shoulders, outlined by the rich dark fur tippet she wore over her black velvet jacket. Her way, too, of carrying her dress up in one hand, as though it had been a habit, was pretty, for she had not looped it up properly because she had been driving. Yes; she was a nice, easy figure—one that would pay for dressing to the full as well as——the young lady who broke upon his vision at the turn of the road, even as he was thinking this. In reality, there were two young ladies and a gentleman, but he overlooked Jack Markham and Nellie Prescott in his admiration of Alice Leslie.

She had risen to the occasion in a manner quite worthy of her aim and herself. That is to say, she had dived to the bottom of one of her trunks and brought up a dress hitherto deemed "too good for the country." Picture her as she advanced to meet Charlie and Di; in a blameless costume of grey plush velvet, looped up over the petticoat, that had stripes of velvet, looking like cross-bars of red pastry upon it. Picture this sheeny, lustrous figure, crowned by waving masses of nut-brown hair, kept well together by the compact little oval black hat—coming along to meet them, knowing that she was perfectly appointed, knowing that she walked well, and knowing, moreover, that the man she was meeting was very keen about such things! Mr. Carew had seen her last in full evening dress, floating round a big ball-room, in another man's

arms. He liked this view of her much better; he liked it so well, in fact, that he did not take his eyes away from her until Nellie exclaimed—

"Well, Mr. Carew, you seem to have forgotten me." Then he shook hands with his future sister-in-law hurriedly, and they all turned to walk homewards.

Presently Henry Prescott joined them, and dismounted. Then the party of six broke into fragments, Nellie and Jack Markham leading, the authorised lovers coming next, and Mr. Prescott and Miss Leslie bringing up the rear. Alice was flushed—with exercise?—most becomingly, and there was just a little touch of agitation in her tone as she said—

"You didn't come home to luncheon to-day; how was that? We were quite dull without you, and offended Willie very much by regretting you openly."

"Did you regret me openly," he asked.

"Yes, I did; it was ungrateful to Willie, was it not? The poor boy had wasted his whole morning in trying to make himself agreeable to Nellie and myself; it took away his appetite to find he had failed."

"I am almost sorry you regretted my absence 'openly,'" Henry Prescott muttered. "Not but what it is very good of you to regret me at all, or think of me at all; but if you had cared much you wouldn't have said it."

He looked eagerly into Alice's face as he said it, and the girl trembled with the dread she had that she might not be able to repress him until the time came for it to matter little whether he spoke or not. He saw the tremor, and fancied it a favourable sign—fancied that she kept her eyes fixed on the ground because she feared to let him see all she was feeling, which she did in truth, though she was feeling something widely different from that which he hoped and imagined.

"It would be difficult for any one under any circumstances to get up much deep feeling about any one else staying away at luncheon time," she said, with

a little laugh, "unless you were a Daniel Lambert missing oysters."

"Have you been walking far?" he asked, irrelevantly.

"About three miles, I believe; they seemed ten to me."

"Has Jack Markham been with you all the time?"

"Nearly—not all the time," she answered, with a scarcely perceptible shrug of the shoulders, which indicated that Jack Markham's presence had added to the seeming distance. The shrug, slight as it was, was not thrown away on the man for whom it was given; it crushed the dawning jealousy he was quite prepared to feel, even about Jack."

"Jack is one of the best fellows in the world," he began, enthusiastically.

"So you all say," she replied, indifferently. "I see that he looks very healthy and happy, and that is about all I do see in him."

"You have heard of him and Di, I suppose; she would have done well to take him."

"Oh, yes; I have heard about it," Alice replied, almost testily. "It would have been funny, though, if she had taken him when she could get Charlie Carew."

She spoke with an earnest warmth that Henry Prescott had never seen her evince about anything before.

"You think highly of Carew, then?" he said; and she remembered herself, and controlled all evidence of emotion, as she replied, coolly enough—

"Oh, yes; as highly as you think of most people of whom you know nothing particular one way or the other. We're very intimate; he's almost like a brother to me."

CHAPTER VI.

"But now to send me back
To faded hopes and fears;
To bid me seek again the track
My foot has left for years.
To cancel what must be;
To alter what has been:
Ah! this indeed is mockery
Fit for a fairy queen."

THE man who was "almost like a brother" to Miss Leslie and that young lady herself found themselves in the drawing-room together for about ten minutes before dinner. Whether the situation was unpremeditated, or the result of design on any one's part, cannot be determined. Alice was not wont to hurry herself over her toilet, but this evening she was ready before either of her friends. Charlie Carew rarely risked the gloom which settles over the "early man" in the drawing-room before dinner: but this day he came down two minutes after Miss Leslie. She was sorting a collection of music when he came in, standing before the piano with her back to the door. Apparently she did not hear him enter, for she maintained her position without making a sign. At last he came near to her and spoke.

"The country seems to agree with you. I never saw you looking better."

He stood facing her now, at the end of the piano, leaning one arm upon it, bending down his head to make her meet the admiration his eyes were expressing.

"It does agree with me, and I'm glad you think I look well. Did you come down before all the others to tell me that?"

"I dare not tell you anything more now."

A scarlet flush supplanted the usual delicate rose-tint on her face as she lifted her head and looked at him. There had been a flirtation between them at one time—a flirtation sufficiently well marked to empower

her own set to kindly talk about it a good deal when Charlie engaged himself to Di Prescott. She remembered all these things as he spoke, and it seemed to her that he remembered them too.

"You are looking so well," he went on, "that if I had been wise I should not have put myself in the way of seeing you."

"The sight is not likely to prove dangerous, Mr. Carew; you are well guarded."

"Am I?—I'm not so sure of that; not so well guarded but that I felt it like a knife in my heart just now when I heard that you were carrying on with Henry Prescott."

"That's simply absurd," the girl said, with a haughty movement of the head—a movement Charlie much admired. He was so foolishly "taken" invariably with all such small airs and graces. "That's simply absurd; besides, if it were the case, wouldn't the arrangement be perfect? He will be your brother; what a charming family party we should be."

"Don't torture me," Di Prescott's lover pleaded. "I appreciate you too highly to calmly contemplate seeing you throw yourself away."

"On one of the family—surely I might be satisfied with what you have found good enough. If it all comes to pass, what a comfort our mother-in-law will be to us both, won't she?"

Mr. Carew winced. Mrs. Prescott was one of the drawbacks he was beginning to find to this marriage scheme of his. Nevertheless it jarred upon him that Alice Leslie should scoff at her. So now he winced, and moved a little impatiently, and Alice took heart of grace in seeing that still she could make him suffer.

"Shall I be one of Di's bridesmaids? She has asked me, but I have hesitated; I wanted to know whether you would like it or not," she asked, going on with her occupation, and speaking out in the accents of feigned unconcern.

"Like it!" He echoed her last words pathetically.

"Does that mean that language of your own cannot tell how much you would like it? or that you're disgusted with me for contemplating occupying a part you have designed for another? or what?"

"It means—I won't tell you; you know very well what it means. You are unfeeling, Alice; as you have no right to be, considering all things."

"Am I unfeeling—considering all things?" Her eyes met his now, sparkling with the light that had often been brought to bear upon him of old, with soft pearly reflections on her transparent forehead cast from the waving raised hair, with one small hand resting upon the pile of music, in dangerously close proximity to his.

It was in him to be carried without consideration by such things—the beauty present was always more potent with him than the beauty absent; he never "made light of the rest if the rose was not there." So now he prisoned the fluttering hand, and told her he "dared not thank her as she deserved to be thanked for letting him see that it had not been all play to her."

"Now we must not get sentimental," the girl said, laughing, and affecting to try and release her hand; "that would be too absurd in your position. Moreover, what would Dinah say?" and again Charlie Carew winced—for the Christian name of his betrothed was far from his taste—as he answered—

"I should hope Di would have too much sense to be jealous."

"Or to seem so: which do you mean?"

"Both; that is a sort of thing I couldn't stand."

"Without cause, and she certainly has no cause to be jealous of me."

"I don't know about that. I thought so myself till I saw you to-day, but now!—Well, any evil consequences that may ensue will be to myself only."

"I am not so sure of that," Alice said, in a low voice, walking away discreetly to the fireplace as she spoke. Then the rest came in; Di with a paler face and a more

anxious look in her eyes than he had ever seen in her before. And his conscience smote him a little about Di, and his heart smote him much about Alice!

It was in vain that he sought to conceal it from himself; he was in a very awkward position. It was not only that duty called him one way and inclination another, but that he was conscious that whatever he did or said, or left undone or unsaid, gave pain to one or other of the two women between whom he was steering his perilous course. Di was jealous with reason and with right. Alice was jealous without either. So he taught himself to believe that it behoved him to give her the least cause for the feeling. It worried him that Di should look wistfully at him when, by tone or glance, he made manifest his too deep admiration for her friend. It worried him, and made him feel that Di was exacting, and inconsiderate, and oppressive, and not at all adapted to share the life he should like to lead. It seemed to him that he could have borne to see Di surrounded by admirers with perfect composure—with more than composure, in fact, with pride and satisfaction. Indeed, he would have been delighted to see his taste endorsed in such a way by other men. It was always pleasant to a man to feel that his wife could command any amount of homage; but he began to fear that Di, good-looking as she undoubtedly was, lacked the charm which would make other men envy him! Alice had it, and no mistake; there would have been some triumph in carrying her off—some compensation for the loss of bachelor freedom in going into a room with a woman who was always faultlessly got up, and to whom every one was eager to be introduced. There had been a most wanton wasting of a golden opportunity in his allowing a passing fancy for a pretty fresh face make him lose Miss Leslie.

She was in the full swing of the society to which he belonged. She would have presided at his table and made his house attractive to his friends in a way that

Di, with her scant knowledge of the world, her country habits and ideas, would be incapable of doing. He knew now that he was only affectionately fond of poor Di; he felt horribly certain that she would pall upon him, and that he would speedily become bored and indifferent to her. Then what a nuisance her being in love with him would be; how hideously his lot would contrast with that of the man who married Alice Leslie. As he thought all these things, sitting there in silence, Di almost fathomed that he was repenting, and again she was torn to pieces with conflicting doubts as to what it would be well—possible—for her to do.

"The heart is a free and a fetterless thing!" Miss Prescott remembered that it was this on the authority of some lyric poet unknown. Free and fetterless, and given to change; it was human to be so, and Charlie Carew was very human. She tried hard not to blame him, not to hate him with the hot hate of tortured love, as she saw the shadow of the coming change.

It was hard, too, to preserve precisely the same demeanour as of old to Alice, to the girl who was winning so easily what Di prized above all earthly things—Charlie's love. There was something that was cruelly hard to bear in Miss Leslie's coolness. Di felt that her state of mind was patent to her rival, and her rival was most airily unconcerned about it—accepting the constraint which overclouded the others as a fitting tribute to her winning powers.

In addition to the private pangs of jealousy, Di was smarting under the half consciousness of its being transparent to her own family, to those who had never cordially approved of Charlie Carew. During all the years she had known him, she had never seen Henry look so grave and sad. The words "dull and mute" but faintly express the quality of the dulness and speechlessness which seemed to possess him; and Di fell into the error of imagining that he was these things on her account, which it need hardly be said

was not the case. He looked at Mr. Carew rather in the light of a rival to himself than a defaulter from his sister now.

We all know what a long evening is like in a country house, when the party is small and three or four of the members of it are quite the reverse of being at their ease. The frequent glances at the clock, whose hands lag as they never lagged before; the lame attempts at establishing general conversation; the hopeless failures in accomplishing the same; the vain efforts to conceal the consciousness of concealing; the wild joy which pervades each heart when the moment for going to bed and getting out of it all arrives; the frantic zeal with which each one clings to the weak hope that before to-morrow night something will have turned up to render matters more endurable. Such evenings have been in the experience of most of us, and surely they are punishment sufficiently heavy for any but the blackest sins of the most hardened offenders.

It would all have gone better if Ellen had not allowed herself to be engrossed by a book, which she found far more agreeable than any of her companions. Indeed, just at the close of the evening, there was, through her agency, a slight reaction against the distrust and monotony that had reigned.

"Let us have some music," she said, briskly. "Come, Alice, you sing, and Di will accompany you."

"What shall I sing?" Alice asked, languidly rising, and addressing Charlie Carew. Nellie answered for him.

"He doesn't know or care anything about singing. I'll select for you—this jolly little song, 'Tis all that I can say.'"

So Alice, standing behind Di, sang the sweet tinkling melody to which Tom Hood's graceful, tender words have been set, and Charlie found himself drawn towards the piano, up near to Alice's side; and Di

kept her face steadily set towards the wall, and knew that her brow was burning.

It was a large room, and the trio at the piano were well removed from the vicinity of the rest of the party. They remained there after the song had come to a conclusion, Di playing a dreamy piece in a reckless way, the other two motionless and silent—strangely motionless and silent—wrapt in the strains, perhaps.

Presently Di felt impelled to break the spell which seemed to be upon them. She broke off suddenly in the middle of a bar, rising and turning round on the instant. As she did so she wished that she had never played at all, or gone on playing for ever, or done anything rather than see what she did—Alice's hand clasped in Charlie's willingly, lovingly, as no girl can suffer her hand to be clasped, save by a man who loves and is loved by her.

The position was embarrassing enough for them all, but it was made more agonizing to Di by her dread that the others had seen it also. She brushed hastily past the pair, saying, as she did so, "I think we are all tired: won't it be well to say good-night, and not disturb Alice in her room to-night, Nellie?" So, contrary to their usual custom, there was no dressing-room chat between the three girls that night. Di wanted to be alone. It was necessary now that she should make up her mind to do something definite on the morrow.

Another mind was also made up that night. Henry Prescott had not seen what his sister had, but he had seen enough to make him heartsore and doubtful. Alice had been very sweet to him—sweet and encouraging, as it never occurred to him a girl would be unless she meant to marry him when he asked her. And from this point of view it seemed impossible that Alice should ever have doubted his intention of asking her, after all he had said and looked. Now it appeared as if there was more than a possibility of a mistake being made, and so he resolved to set the doubt at rest in the morning.

It was not Henry Prescott whom Alice Leslie had hoped and expected to see when she left the house for a before-breakfast stroll the next day. That it was not was painfully evident to him when she gave him her hand unwillingly, and turned her face, where a blush of vexation reigned, towards the house, as if in anticipation of some other appearing.

"You are early this morning," he began, turning round, with the evident intention of accompanying her.

"Yes. I'm soon going away, you know, and it has come to me to feel that I have been wasting opportunity in not seeing more of the country—at all times of day, I mean. I may never have the chance again."

"Often, I hope."

"Then it will be when I am travelling."

"Who knows? you may live here."

"Never, I hope," the girl answered, almost pettishly. "I should cut my throat in a week if I felt myself fixed in an English country place for life. I haven't the local mind. I can't stand middle-class country people and their small interests, their wild excitement about each other's housemaids' iniquities, and their generally placid monotony. You see, I am not 'to the manner born.' I should adopt it awkwardly."

She spoke rapidly and earnestly. With all his admiration for her, Henry Prescott had never been much impressed with the truthfulness of this "girl for whom his heart was sick." But he felt that she spoke the truth now, and he was more pained by its being the truth than vexed at her rudeness in speaking it.

"You have had an unfortunate experience of 'middle-class country people,' Miss Leslie," he said gravely.

"No, I have not; I have had a remarkably favourable experience. I have known you and your mother and sisters, and I am very fond of you all, and you know it; but you are unlike the majority, and when one speaks of a class one thinks of the majority."

"Wherever you were the rough and coarse would fall away in awe, and the refined would seek and assimilate with you: it would be so, trust me, even in the country."

She laughed, and shook her head.

"Thanks for the compliment and the flattery, but I have no ambition to reform a neighbourhood."

They had come to a little wicket-gate that opened out from the plantation through which they had walked into a meadow. They stopped at it, and she leant her arms on the top of it, and bent her head down in a nervous impatient manner, that was in harmony with her words and way of uttering them.

The man by her side did not deem his deserts other than small with regard to this girl, but he did not "fear his fate too much." If he had erred in his estimate of her, he would realise the full effects of that estimate at once.

"Have I been mistaken about you all this time, Alice?" he began; and she lifted up her eyes and asked innocently—

"All what time?"

"All the time you've seemed to—like me to love you."

"No, not a bit mistaken. I have liked you to love me as a sister."

"It was no sister's interest you have shown in me." He spoke very sadly. Alice Leslie would have been more flattered if he had infused a touch of bitterness into his tone. She rather liked to be reviled about such things; the scalp had an additional charm which had cost the victim visible torture in the taking.

"It was no sister's interest you have shown in me; at least I thought it meant more, and I've been mistaken. You'll forgive me for troubling you about it, won't you?"

"Yes," she said, holding out her hand to him; and he took it, standing still, like one who was sorely stricken.

"Forgive you, yes; and be very grateful to and fond of you," she murmured; "and you will forgive me for having been blind, for that is what it has been."

"No, not that," he said, dropping her hand. "Keep truthful, Alice, in word at least. You have not been blind; you saw it all, and knew what was coming, and helped it forward, and I know you did all this and can forgive you; but I can't forgive you if you're false enough to pretend you're taken by surprise. There, I have said my last word on the subject."

"And we shall always be friends?" she asked, pathetically.

"Yes, always, if you care for my friendship. I can't turn against a girl I love because she prefers another fellow; but you have been a bright star in my life, Alice, and it will seem dark for a long time without you."

"You won't miss me for long; no one is missed for long," she said.

"Is that your creed? Well, it's not mine, thank heaven." Then he went away and left her, and she waited on expectantly, impatiently, and no one came.

Not that the one for whom she waited, Charlie Carew, was a laggard in love by any means, but he found himself very unexpectedly detained. Di Prescott's voice summoned him into the drawing-room as he was picking up his cap in the hall, preparatory to taking a stroll, about the same time that Henry joined Alice. "Come in here, Charlie," she cried out, in a firm, clear tone, and he, reassured by the tone, went in unhesitatingly.

She got up and met his extended hand warmly, but stood off when he would have kissed her; at which rebuff he shrugged his shoulders and sauntered off to the window, as though a woman's whims were really beyond him.

"It's always useless going round a subject, isn't it, Charlie?" she began. "It would break my heart,

crush me completely, to marry you and feel that you loved Alice Leslie. After what I saw last night can I be sure, can you be sure yourself, that you don't care more for her than for me?"

"You are exacting."

"Am I? Perhaps so, about what is due to my love and your honour. Look you here," she added abruptly, and then came a look in her eyes that made her more beautiful than Alice Leslie for the moment, "I will never be tolerated. I believe I can endure a sharp pain, but I will not court the dull aching of indifference. If I am not prized above every one, I will not seem to be held dear by you in a lesser degree. I offer you your release from all the vows you made the other day, and no one shall ever blame you to me for taking it; but I *can't* play second to any woman in the world."

"Do you dread my asking you to do so?"

"Not your asking, but your forcing me to do so. I am not good enough to rashly engage to play the part of a neglected wife."

"I cannot condescend to combat mad jealousy."

She laughed scornfully.

"Don't be bitter, Charlie. The remembrance of the position you both put me in last night might check anything of that sort, if the thought of the easy way out of your difficulty which I show to you does not do it."

"If you wish to break off the engagement I can make no appeal. I had better leave to-day, and write to your brother from town."

"I will tell my brother. As to your leaving to-day, well, Charlie, that you must decide about."

She regarded him wistfully while she gave him this last chance of appealing against her "offer of release." He did not take it, and two hours afterwards the groom drove him to the station, and the Prescotts saw him for the last time, while Di took herself for a long drive, with only Pet and her thoughts for companions.

The evil-doer meanwhile was not flourishing like a green bay tree. Alice Leslie was very far from being guiltless in the matter; but guilty people get such hard measure dealt out to them by their friends, that it is quite a relief occasionally to take the other side. My sympathies have always gone greatly with the kindly old Scotchwoman, who inquired regretfully why nobody prayed for the "puir de'il." So now there is strong temptation to lighten the darkness which hangs over Alice.

Naturally she did not stay very long in the house after having refused the master of it. She occupied herself a great portion of the day in packing her trunks; and the rest of it in writing letters; and when she came down to dinner there were more traces of tears on her face than on Di's. When she departed from the Prescotts she did so with many protestations of eternal friendship for Di, and many entreaties that Di would come and spend part of "next season" with her at Bayswater. But before that next season Mrs. Leslie had pointed out the path of duty to Charlie Carew, and compelled that young man to take it. Need it be said that the aforesaid path led to the altar, where Alice soon joined him. Jack Markham, when he heard of it, felt that his star was in the ascendant again. Whether it was so or not shall be told at some future time, when passages from the married life of Charlie Carew will be given to those who have been interested in his last bachelor days.

FOR A YEAR.

"WANTED, as Companion and Finishing Governess for a Young Lady, a person who is thoroughly competent to teach German and Italian, and the harp. Salary, £100 a year. Address Q. S. L., Post-office, Risdon, —shire." I wanted a situation, and believed myself to be "thoroughly competent" to impart the accomplishments specified in the above advertisement. I read it in the first edition of the "Times" one Monday morning about two o'clock, as I sat eating my luncheon in the dusky background of that most convenient haunt for governesses and other unprotected ladies, the confectioner's at the corner where Oxford and Regent Streets cross each other. I had been all the morning drawing from the life in a well-known studio in Newman Street—one of a miscellaneous group who were pursuing art, more or less industriously, for more or less disinterested reasons.

My own pursuit of art I may as well acknowledge at once was not very earnest. I was "doing a little in oils," I always said at home when I was questioned as to my progress, and I had the satisfaction of looking down upon my sisters as I said it. They only blended colours and portrayed form in Berlin wool on canvas.

The truth is, that home life to the majority of young women of my status in society is a very dull thing. My father is a medical man, practising at Brompton, making a good income, living in very good style, and withal educating his children thoroughly well. My two brothers are University men, and were intended for the learned professions, and my two sisters and myself, after being well grounded by a clergyman in England, had been given four years abroad—two in Germany and two in a French convent near Paris.

We all had "resources within ourselves," as the conventional phrase has it. That is to say, culture had taught us to appreciate good literature, nature had given us great musical talent which careful scientific instruction had developed well, and we were all adepts in the art of so arranging our household-gods as to put them in a fair light before other people. Still, I the eldest and most restless-natured of the three, felt that I needed something more to make life full enough for me. I wanted to do something with the time that remained over and above to me, when I had read and played and visited till I was tired.

I had been a student at the atelier in Newman Street about five months when this advertisement which I have copied came upon me like a revelation. In an instant I resolved to follow the path it pointed out. I would be that governess-companion, and utilise my knowledge of German and Italian, and the harp. I had often wished to get out of London: now, the opportunity was given me, and I would go.

I was in a small flush of excitement when I determined on this. Delays are dangerous. I would write at once. I would not wait to go home and discuss my project in family council. So I paid for my luncheon, bought a sheet of paper and an envelope, and sat down again in the midst of that army of educational martyrs who congregate at this shop, to write an application for the situation advertised.

It has never been in my nature to vacillate—to put

my hand to the plough, and then draw back because the ground to be traversed is rough or dangerous. As soon as I had penned my application, I felt that I was bound in honour to myself to stand the consequences of it. If they would have me, I was pledged to go, although my letter was not posted yet.

It was a sultry July day this one on which I made my first effort to "do something," and a feeling of idleness, languor, and general disinclination to go back to the close, stuffy studio possessed me when I had finished my letter. Though I could hardly have given a reason, I felt justified in being idle for the remainder of this day. I think the feeling arose from my having taken steps towards being so uncommonly industrious for an indefinite period in the matter of this governess-companionship business.

The room in which I sat and the shop in front of it, teemed with members of the class to which I aspired just now to belong. The earnest aspiration caused me to regard them more curiously than I had ever done before, and I fell to speculating whether that indelible stamp which marked them daughters of mental toil, would ever be impressed on my brow as it was on theirs. There were many types of this great order there. Daily governesses, drawing mistresses, teachers of singing, teachers of music; German, French, and Englishwomen; they were all there mixed up in this place, day after day, during their hour of freedom, yet utter strangers to one another at last as at first.

I fancied, being young, imaginative, and self-satisfied, that I had no inconsiderable insight into character in those days; that I could read who and what these people were in their faces, manners, and customs. The middle-aged woman in the corner reading the leading article in the "Daily Telegraph," and making a hearty luncheon of beef and stout, could be nothing, I decided, but a singing-mistress; no one else would so recklessly venture upon so stupefying a beverage at that hour of the day; and looking at her face, I made

out a little story to fit it, and told myself that she must have been a concert-singer once, and pretty about the same time; that her soft brown hair and eyes, and pale, fair, smiling, composed face, had won the love of some one who wanted to marry and could not support her; that she had married him, as thousands of women do, for companionship, protection, as some one to care for her as years creep on, and because she would not be called an old maid; and that now he was ill, or not doing anything remunerative, and she was teaching singing to support herself, and doing it cheerfully.

Leaving her to her leading article, her beef and stout, my gaze sought a pair who were at the same long table with myself, evidently a mother and daughter. The mother was a wisp of a woman in rusty black, with a pale sorrowing face; the daughter was a delicate-looking girl, of about nineteen or twenty, a pretty exotic-looking creature, like a foreign white lily. They were both turning over the papers that lay upon the table when I looked at them first, and after a while the daughter's eye fell on the same advertisement that had attracted my attention. Her face grew crimson and her eyes brightened as she hastily handed it to her mother with the words—

"Shall I try for it?"

"It is one more chance," the sad mother answered tenderly. And when I knew they wished for it, I was sorry that I was pledged myself to try for the situation. Opposite to this mother and daughter who had enlisted my sympathies, sat a girl of about three or four-and-twenty, in whose manner there was that unmistakeable mixture of the corrective and instructive air that permeates so many of the women whose mission in life it is to form the manners and the mind of the rising generation. "Shall I lose my individuality while I am with these people near Risdon?" I mentally asked myself. The thought of failing in my attempt, of being refused, never entered into my calculations for a moment. "Shall I ever lower my voice and sober my

bearing with that odious involuntary humility which used to oppress me so much in my own governesses? What will be the experience of my year of tuition, I wonder?" So I soliloquised until the clock struck three. The crowd had nearly dispersed to their accustomed avocations, and I rose and walked away leisurely to a cab that conveyed me home.

I need scarcely say that as mine was an entirely unlooked-for scheme, so was it entirely disapproved of by all the members of my own family. My father said that he liked to have all his girls about him of an evening. My mother added that "Life was full of temptations to young people, especially young women, and she should never know a happy moment while I was away with these strangers." And my sisters half envied and half blamed me for not going away from the monotonous routine that could, in their estimation, be interrupted with propriety only by marriage.

However, to cut a long story short, I adhered to my plan, and when the advertiser wrote to me to accept my offer of service, I proceeded to carry out that plan without delay by starting off at once to the Risdon railway-station, where a carriage was to meet and carry me to my new home.

My father and mother both saw me safely to the Great Western terminus, and bade me farewell with a few tears and a great many prognostications of my finding things at Wearham Chase duller than I should be able to endure. "If you do, you'll think of what I have always said, that home is the proper place for young girls," my mother said, kissing me. "If you do, you'll know where to come," my father continued, following her example. And I laughed happily, and told them, "Let what would happen, I would stand it for a year." Then we parted, and for an hour or two I indulged myself unrestrainedly in a fit of natural depression. But at mid-distance my youth and the elasticity of my temperament triumphed, together with

the conviction I had that I was doing the right thing in endeavouring to help myself.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon when the train stopped, and I heard the guard shout out "Risdon!" In a few minutes I and my luggage were planted on the platform, the train was whirling on, and a servant in a plain, grey livery was asking me if I "was Miss Archer." My response in the affirmative was corroborated by the tickets on my trunk; so directing a porter to shoulder the latter, this servant respectfully showed me the way out from the station to the road, where a handsome carriage and a pair of bay horses were awaiting me.

"How far is it to Wearham Chase?" I asked, as I took my seat, and the man replied "Six miles." "It must be in the heart of the country, indeed," I thought. To be six miles from a railway-station was a more delightfully secluded fate than I had ever hoped would be mine. And in such a lovely land as this appeared to be, with its wealth of verdure and water, of hill and valley. It was a fate to rejoice in, and I rejoiced accordingly.

I have reason to know that six good English miles do lie between Risdon station and Wearham Chase. But on the occasion of my first travelling over the road, the magical influence of the fresh, beautiful country was over me so strongly, that we seemed to be upon the grounds of the Chase as soon as we were clear of the environs of the railway-station. We entered the grounds through a sufficiently imposing gateway that was placed at the angle of two roads. There was a well-kept piece of turf outside the gates —a piece of turf that gave wayfarers a hint as to the nature of the land within. One portion of it was shaded by a fine willow, the others were studded with a whitethorn, an auraucaria, and a shapely, glossy-leafed holly. I had barely time to take in the promise these shrubs gave of greenness in winter, before the gates—or doors rather, for they were of solid wood—

swung open, and we rolled into an avenue that wound along for a mile at least under the shade of fine old elms.

Long before this time intense curiosity as to the people with whom I had come to sojourn for a year claimed me for its own. I must confess to having been possessed with a raging impatience to see them and the house. I kept on putting my head out, first at one window, then at the other, warily, lest I should be detected in the undignified act. At length the trees ceased to overshadow the drive, which wound round in a grand sweep to the front of a large, lofty, many-windowed mansion of red bricks—the sort of house that old English gentlemen who had a fine estate did build for themselves in the golden days of good Queen Anne.

A clock that was placed in the wall above the entrance-door struck six as I got out of the carriage and passed into the hall, where I was met by a lady whom I at once put down in my own mind as the housekeeper. She was an old, quiet, gentle-faced lady, in dark grey silk, with a massive gold chatelain hanging at her side, from which depended a few keys in token of her calling. She gave me a grave yet gracious welcome, took me up to a beautifully-furnished bedroom, and promised to send a servant to help me to prepare for the seven o'clock dinner, for which the family were already dressing. When she had done this she walked with a hesitating step to the door, but came back directly to the couch on which I had seated myself, to say—"You look almost as young as your pupil, Miss Archer; it will be a pleasant surprise to her to see you what you are."

"Why?" I asked, laughing, and then added, "Please tell me your name; I ought not to remain ignorant of the name of my first friend at Wearham Chase."

"I am Mrs. Digby, the housekeeper," she replied; and then she went on to tell me that she had lived at

Wearham Chase in her present capacity for the last ten years only, but that she had known the family all her life, her father having been their solicitor, and her husband land agent to the late Mr. Hazelwood, the present proprietor's brother.

"And is Miss Hazelwood—my pupil that is to be—their only daughter?" I asked.

"Your pupil is not a Miss Hazelwood; she is not their daughter, but my mistress's niece," Mrs. Digby said. "She is a Miss Verney, but she's made quite as much of by master and every one else as if she was a child of the house. If she guessed what you were like she would have been to see you before this," the housekeeper continued, laughing; "but she's very high-spirited, and the plan of having a governess didn't please her."

"Who planned it, then?" I asked.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hazelwood thought it best that Miss Verney should have full occupation for a year," Mrs. Digby said, gravely, and I repeated after her—

"For a year! why that is just as long as I hope to stay here; our plans seem to agree wonderfully well." Then I made greater haste than usual to dress, without paying any attention to the look of surprised horror with which the excellent retainer of the house of Hazelwood regarded the stranger who made such daringly light mention of the arrangements of that high and mighty race.

I was only just dressed when the dinner bell rang. Mrs. Hazelwood, I heard, was "waiting for me in the drawing-room." So, ushered by Mrs. Digby, to the drawing-room I went. A tall, fair, pale woman, with an exceedingly graceful figure and manner, rose and advanced courteously to make me welcome as Mrs. Digby mentioned my name. She held out her hand to me, said a few kind words, by which she made me understand that she was both glad to see me, and glad to see me what I was, and then rang the bell, and desired that Miss Verney should be asked to come to us at once.

When the door closed behind the servant who went on this mission, Mrs. Hazelwood turned to me again, and said hurriedly—

"Miss Archer, before I even introduce my niece and you to each other, let me bespeak your interest in her, and forbearance towards her. She is not much younger than you are. She has been petted, prized, and indulged all her life. She is peculiarly situated; she has been most severely tried; these circumstances combined, have rendered her less patient and considerate than we could desire to see her. Be kind to her," she continued hurriedly, as the door opened, and a young lady came hastily into the room.

As she came swiftly across the floor towards the chair in which Mrs. Hazelwood had seated herself abruptly when the door opened, I had time to see that she was a beautiful, graceful young creature. Her face had the delicate oval, and the exquisite, straight, chiselled nose of a Greek statue. Her bright golden hair was drawn back from her forehead under black velvet fillets, and raised up high behind, in an enormous chignon. The proportions of her splendid figure were well displayed in a full, long dress of soft white llama. She was both a statuesque and a fashionable-looking beauty; and I began to wonder what I was to teach this belle, who was a woman grown.

"I heard that you wanted me, Aunt Emily," she began, without so much as glancing towards me; "what is it?"

Her voice was young and fresh, rich and full, but there was a jarring chord somewhere. It did not sound contented.

"I want to introduce you to Miss Archer, dear Isabel," Mrs. Hazelwood replied; and I fancied that I detected a conciliatory strain in the elder lady's tone, as she addressed the younger one. Miss Verney turned slightly towards me, and made a cold, but perfectly graceful inclination of the head. She was evidently disposed to regard me as an interloper, an

inferior, and a nuisance generally; and I had not the slightest intention of being so regarded by her.

"You did not expect to find Miss Archer what she is, did you?" Mrs. Hazelwood asked cheerfully.

"No; I did not," the girl answered slowly, scrutinising my countenance closely the while.

"And I did not expect to find you what you are, when I so hastily answered the advertisement, or I should not have had the presumption to do so," I said laughing. And then her beautiful mouth dimpled at the corners, the lips parted, her little white teeth glittered, and her whole face was transformed by a smile.

"I can only hope that neither governess nor pupil are disagreeably surprised," Mrs Hazelwood said, with a relieved air. Then, as the servant threw open the door, the mistress of the house added, "Your uncle will not be home to-night, Isabel; we dine alone."

Before dinner was over, I had become interested in both my companions. The elder lady was very kind to me—not in the oppressively kind, largely superior manner which is conventionally ascribed to ladies in some three-volume records of governesses' woes, but kind in a way that made me feel glad that I had obeyed my impulse, and answered her advertisement. The young lady appealed to me still more strongly. She was charming, cultivated, fascinating. But every now and then there crept into her manner, and into her face, some of that same discontent which I had observed in her voice when she first spoke on entering the drawing-room. This shade of dissatisfaction deepened when dinner was over, and we had gone back to the drawing-room. For a time she talked to me—of my life in Germany, of my home life; of the dulness of this country life of hers, surrounded as it was with beauties; of new books and new operas, and new music generally. She talked gaily enough of all these things, for a time.

But only for a short time. Before the lamp was lighted, while the window was still open to admit the

soft twilight, and the softer summer air, her mood changed, and she grew so silent and sad, that I found myself watching her white, thoughtful face with pity. Her aunt saw me doing this, I think, for she said quickly—"Sing me something, Miss Archer, to the harp, will you? it will be such a treat for me to hear the harp again."

I went over to the harp and tried it. It was in perfect order, and I asked—"Who keeps it in tune, Mrs. Hazelwood? Harp-strings will not bear neglect: I should have thought this was well attended to."

"Because I have had a tune on it to-day," Mrs. Hazelwood replied. "It is Isabel's instrument; but she gave it up after a few lessons."

"Why did you do that?" I asked, as I sat down, and drew the harp towards me. She was lounging gracefully on a couch near me, and as she turned her face to me to give her answer, I saw that the sadness had vanished, and that her face was dimpled with smiles.

"Because—because it bored me, as most other things did about that same time. I was sick and weary of the world and all in it; and as I couldn't 'sing to the harp with a psalm of thanksgiving,' I wouldn't sing at all."

"Isabel!" her aunt said reproachfully; shocked at the light manner in which Miss Isabel had made her quotation. I thought that the best thing I could do would be to sing, and so stop the conversation. Accordingly, I commenced, and had the satisfaction of feeling, when my song was half over, that half my audience had wearied of it. Miss Verney had sauntered out through the open window on to the terrace.

"Miss Archer," Mrs. Hazelwood said in a low tone, as soon as my strain was over, "I do hope that my niece will repose confidence in you. I am sure that it will do her good. Try to win her to do it."

"I will try, if you wish me to do so," I replied.

"And you will succeed if you try. I feel sure of

that. We do love her so dearly," the lady went on energetically, "and we have been so unhappy about her unhappiness, so fearful that we may not have done everything for the best!"

"What are you saying, Aunt Emily?" Miss Verney asked, suddenly stepping back into the room. "Don't waste your time in here any longer. Come out and look along the beech-tree avenue; it looks grand to-night."

It did look grand that night; that double row of beeches on either side of a luxuriantly fern-bordered broad grass walk. It led away from an old disused terrace at some short distance from the house—a terrace, the mere contemplation of which brought back hoop and farthingale; talk about Addison, Steele, "Old Sarah," the arrogant pretensions of the great Dutch hero, and other topics that were current when that old terrace was new.

In front of it ran a low castellated wall, and at intervals along this wall marble vases, stiff, but shapely in form, were placed. Many of them were mutilated, but in spite of being thus defaced, they were fair objects in the warm moonlight of that glorious July night.

"The beech-tree avenue is the glory of Wearham Chase," Miss Verney said, when we had stood looking into its depths from the end of the terrace for some time. "As you are a stranger, seeing it for the first time, you ought to know the position it takes among avenues. It is quite in the front ranks of the noble army of avenues. I hope you are impressed with it, Miss Archer."

The young lady spoke with a little laughing air of scorn of that which she was extolling in words. I observed this, and at the same time observed that her manner pained her aunt. So I answered her as though she had spoken in honest earnest, and said—"This beech-tree avenue might be the glory of a king's park. I am impressed with it; but words must always be

inadequate to convey such impressions from one to another."

Miss Verney shrugged her shoulders. "What a pity Uncle James is not here to hear Miss Archer," she said, turning to Mrs. Hazelwood. Then she clasped her light scarf round her closely, and said hurriedly,—"Well, I'm getting very cold, but I won't insist on your feeling a chill. Good night, dear Aunt Emily; good night, Miss Archer. You will find me your most obedient pupil to-morrow, but to-night I claim the liberty of the subject, and shall go off to bed now at once." She was gone from us almost before I had time to say "good night," and we were left alone on the steps at the end of the terrace looking along the beech-tree avenue in embarrassed silence. Presently, after the lapse of a minute or two, Mrs. Hazelwood spoke. "Miss Archer," she said energetically, "do strive to win Isabel's confidence; do not be discouraged by what you have seen of her to-night; I had high hopes, great expectations of possible good, when I advertised for an intelligent and cultivated companion for her. I think you will more than realise them. God grant you patience." "Can the young lady be mad," I thought, but I said nothing, and Mrs Hazelwood went on;—"We have no children of our own, and our love for her, and pride in her, are very great; too great perhaps; yet with all our care we have not been able to avert bitter misery from her, and I fear there is more in store for her. I will not tell you what it is yet, as I hope she may open her heart to you. I am sure you will have a healthy influence over her."

"You are very kind to say so," I replied, scarcely knowing what to reply.

"Not kind," the lady went on in an agitated tone; "I am perhaps a little too candid; but Isabel is so precious to me, a childless woman, that I am apt to lose judgment about her, and both to conceal and to lay bare too much concerning her. But it is getting chilly; we will go in." We went in, and after a little

more conversation on indifferent topics, and a little more music, and some light refreshment, we went to bed, without seeing anything more of Miss Verney for that night. The next morning I came to a definite understanding with my employer as to what I was expected to teach my pupil. I learnt that I was to be ready "to bear with her at all times." That "was all," Mrs. Hazelwood said imploringly. "The German and French and harp might amuse her sometimes, but what she wants is companionship of a—of a—of a similar kind to yours, I am sure, my dear Miss Archer," Mrs. Hazelwood said, finishing off with a complimentary generality.

All this promised pleasantness and ease enough; rather too much ease, in fact; for at first I did not at all incline to the state of salaried idleness to which I was condemned by Miss Verney's caprice, and Mrs. Hazelwood's indulgence of it. But after a time I became so completely one of the family, that I took my large share of the goods that were provided quite complacently, and never strove to teach Isabel to do more than love me.

I had been there about three months before I got hold of any sort of clue as to the reason of Isabel's uncertain demeanour, and the Hazelwoods' strange surrendering of themselves to it. The girl was evidently idolised by her aunt, and very much considered, loved, and indulged by her uncle. Still at times there would be in her manner towards them such a burst of untoward discontent and dissatisfaction that, if I had not begun to love her dearly, I should have held her very much to blame. But at the close of a bright, beautiful, ruddy and golden October day, Isabel asked me to go and sit in her dressing-room with her, before the hour of dressing for dinner. It was a charmingly pretty as well as an exceedingly comfortable room. Two sides of the walls were panelled with mirrors; the third held a capacious wardrobe between the windows; the fourth was occupied by the fireplace, on one side of which

was the entrance to her bedroom, screened by day with heavily falling curtains; the other side of the fireplace was taken up with a huge dressing-table, in the centre of which swung a cheval glass. There were easy-chairs, a low ottoman, a couch, and one or two fancifully-shaped tables. On this special evening the room looked specially pretty, for a small char-wood fire burnt on the grate, and on one of the fanciful tables tea and thin bread-and-butter, served in the rarest Dresden, stood ready prepared for us.

As soon as I was installed in one of the easiest chairs, with a cup of tea in my hand, Miss Verney began—"I have never liked to ask you before, but I will now, Miss Archer. Do you—has my aunt said anything—or has Mrs. Digby told you anything about me?"

She asked in a hesitating, affectedly careless manner, that was not natural to her. I saw that her face had flushed a good deal, and that she was trying to read the truth in my eyes, without exactly meeting them. However, I wished to meet her gaze fully before I answered. Then I said, "They have never either of them said more to me about you than this, that you are very dear to them both, and that Mr. and Mrs. Hazelwood prize you as their own child, and value your happiness above their own. Is there more to tell?"

I asked the question frankly, and frankly she answered me, as she placed herself in the chair opposite to me—"Only this, that I am engaged to be married."

"Really! And soon? No, they never hinted at that great fact. I wish you joy, Isabel, with all my heart."

"And with all my heart I thank you for the wish, and believe it will be realised," she said heartily. "So they have never told you? And I have been half angry the whole time you have been here, fancying that they had."

"Why should you be angry at my hearing of your happiness?"

"Because——; oh! it's so tedious to give reasons; because it's in the future, and because third people always make a bungle of such matters when they try to unravel them for the benefit of a fourth."

"Shall you be married soon?"

"In about eight months from now. It was to help me to bear this year of engagement patiently that they secured you as my companion. And really, Helen, as good uncle would have it, I couldn't have had a dearer one. Are you engaged?" I told her that I had not the honour of being so, and asked her where her future husband was, and what was his name and occupation. "His name is Boulding;—Gerald Boulding, of Clanmere, one of the finest places in the country, about twenty miles from here; his health has been, not bad, but not quite good for the last six months, and he's on the Continent. You're sure you never heard of him?"

"Quite sure."

"Never heard of his being here, at Wearham Chase, at all?"

"Never," I replied.

"Ah," she said, with a relieved air. "I made sure that dear old Digby had been babbling. I'm delighted to find that she has not. And Aunt Emily has not spoken of him either?"

"Indeed she has not," I said, thinking the while that it would have been only natural if some one had mentioned to me the current engagement and approaching marriage of the one who was the centre of all interest at Wearham Chase. Having broken the ice, Miss Verney enlarged upon the theme as only a woman can enlarge upon a theme that is dear to her. She told me that she had not seen Mr. Boulding for nearly five months; that he would remain away until April, when he would return, and set about the alterations that were to be made at Clanmere for the reception of its mistress;—and that in June,—in the month of roses,—they were to be married. "But there are dull, dreary months to be lived through before my wedding-day comes,"

she said, at the end of a long, loving account which she had given me of him. "There is a weary time to be passed in some way or other, before Gerald comes back in April. Oh, dear! oh, dear! I suppose we had better dress for dinner, Helen, and not bewail the inevitable any longer just now."

I got up to go away to my own room at the hint; but before I went I said, "You are a happier girl than I thought you even, Isabel. I have always believed your position to be a most enviable one; but through ignorance I underrated its attractions."

She shook her head despondingly. "I am not half as happy as you are, Helen, in spite of it all;—but it's no use complaining. I can't mend matters," she said, turning away to one of the glasses. "These months of anxiety and suspense are altering me," she added impatiently, as she looked at the reflection of her fair young face. "Gerald will not find me improved if he does;—when he does—come back." From this time Miss Verney spoke freely to me on the subject. Once or twice she mentioned having heard from Mr. Boulding. She showed me a ring, a rare intaglio, that he had sent her from Florence, and consulted me about her trousseau. "Aunt Emily says it will be quite time enough to set about ordering it when Gerald comes back to England," she said to me one day; "but I should like to begin at once. There will be so much to do."

"But it can surely be done in a couple of months," I said laughing. "Remember the old adage, Isabel, 'There's many a slip'—."

"How I detest vulgar old proverbs," she replied angrily, and dropped the subject of the trousseau for a week or two.

Soon after this Mrs. Hazelwood spoke of Mr. Boulding to me for the first time. She mentioned him merely as one of the great county men; and so in order that there might not be any misunderstanding between us, and that she might not suspect me of undue reserve,

I told her that Isabel had mentioned her engagement to me. Mrs. Hazelwood watched me anxiously while I was making this communication, and when I closed it she said;—"I am very very glad that Isabel has of her own accord told you so much, Miss Archer. I hoped before this that she would have told you more; the reason James and I have been so reserved on the point is that we wished Isabel to tell you herself; you had heard nothing of it before, had you?" I assured her that I had not heard anything of it before, and could not help wondering why they made a mystery of what promised to be such a good match for Isabel. However I learnt no more just then, for, after expressing a hope that her niece would still further confide in me, and that I might prove, when this confidence was made, the judicious friend they expected me to be, Mrs. Hazelwood resumed her reserve.

Time went on, and April was close at hand. I must state here that it struck me as strange that Miss Verney's engagement was never alluded to in the society of the neighbourhood. The Hazelwoods entertained and visited a great deal, and their beautiful niece was evidently regarded as an acquisition wherever she appeared. But no notice was ever taken of her being a betrothed, and no one ever named Mr. Boulding before her. At length Mrs. Hazelwood solved this mystery for me. Their kindness and consideration for me had won from me in return a very genuine regard and affection for the whole family. They were conscious of this, and made me feel that they were glad of it. It was early in April, a day or two before Mr. Boulding was expected home, that Mrs. Hazelwood enlightened me as to the cause of Isabel's disquiet. "I could have wished she had told you everything herself," the dear old lady said with a sigh; "but as she has not, I will. The fact is, her uncle and I don't quite like Mr. Boulding, or quite approve of the marriage."

"Why not?" I asked in surprise.

"It's a long story, but I will tell it briefly," she re-

plied. "Gerald Boulding has been the best match in the county ever since he came of age; so that when three years ago he proposed to Isabel every one congratulated and envied us. We were very proud and pleased ourselves, for—though married or single she will have the same portion from my husband as he would have given a daughter—it was a brilliant marriage for her. There had been rumours of wildness and dissipation, but there are such about many young men. We had even heard a word of an attachment of long years to some one whom our dear child ought never to have succeeded. But we were made to disregard all these things by his protestations, and Isabel's love for him. Two years ago they were to have been married; everything was ready—the guests invited—the day named in the local papers—the poor child in such a blaze of unclouded happiness as she cannot know again—when a cruel blow fell. A messenger came one night from Clanmere with a letter to Mr. Hazelwood. It was from Gerald Boulding, stating that he was obliged to go abroad—that untoward circumstances prevented his marrying at the time appointed, but that he hoped to come back in a few weeks and explain himself, and win Isabel's forgiveness. Think of the scandal at the time! Think of how it deepened when, instead of weeks, he stayed away months! At last, when he did come back, we used all the power our love gave us over Isabel to induce her to have nothing more to do with him. We failed. She forgave him, though he gave no proper explanation of his conduct, and we were obliged to give our consent to the renewal of the engagement, if he stood the test of constancy he himself proposed—namely, time and absence from her. He now professes to have stood that test, and is coming back, as you know, to be married in June."

"She must be very fond of him," I said.

"She is devoted to him," Mrs. Hazelwood replied: "badly as he behaved to her. She has only lived, I

verily believe, on the thought of being united to him. Her uncle and I wanted to take her out of the neighbourhood, but she would not go. She said it would look as if she were ashamed either of him or of herself. Then her spirits got low, and her temper variable; and we advertised, and you came, and you know the rest. I assure you I have often trembled to think of the effects suspense and doubt would have on her."

"It will soon be over now," I said cheerfully; and Mrs. Hazelwood sighed heavily as she replied—

"It will indeed."

In a few days the recreant lover came; and when I saw him I could not wonder at Isabel having been lenient. He was refined, polished, cultivated, handsome, debonair in manner, and devoted to his betrothed. He loaded her with attentions and with rich gifts. He hurried on the alterations at Clanmere, and the bridal preparations at Wearham Chase. Once more the day was fixed and the guests invited. Isabel was in a perfect blaze of happiness. Even the Hazelwoods could not refuse to be cordial and pleased with a man who made life so bright a thing to their darling niece. The trousseau and the cake arrived—the first was all that the heart of woman could desire, the second all that the art of confectionery could achieve. All the spare bedrooms in the house were strewn with rich silks and costly laces. The wedding-dress itself was a marvel of white satin and lace; the myrtle-wreath, the long veil, the bridal bouquets, all were perfect; and Isabel called upon me a dozen times a day to say that they were so.

The wedding-day came. The marriage was to take place at half-past eleven, and at ten minutes to that hour I came from Isabel's room for the first time that morning, and went down stairs. Mr. Boulding was to have come to the house, but he had not arrived. It was surmised that he had gone to the church; so a couple of messengers were despatched there to see if the surmise was correct. Minutes slipped by. I re-

turned to Isabel, who was momentarily expecting to be summoned. She asked me some question about Gerald, and I told her what we thought, "that he had gone straight to the church." Her face grew very white, and she walked to the window which commanded a view of the beech-tree avenue, and gazed along its shaded vista with her eyes flashing and her lips quivering with excitement. "He would come this way—it's the nearest road to Clanmere," she said, after a few minutes' silent watch. "Helen, go down and hear what uncle and aunt Emily think we had better do. I will go down to the church; he may be there."

"Wait a minute," I pleaded; "we shall hear directly Mr. Boulding arrives." Then, not daring to disobey her, I went to speak to the Hazelwoods, much as I dreaded leaving Isabel alone. I found the Hazelwoods in a room by themselves. They had come away from those of the guests who had assembled according to invitation before the ceremony at Wearham.

"I could not face the gathering doubt which I saw growing amongst them," Mrs. Hazelwood said, excitedly; "I can't go and speak to that poor child. James, what can we do?"

"Nothing," Mr. Hazelwood said sternly. "We can only wait for a while—not for long."

"Will you send to Clanmere to make inquiries?" Mrs. Hazelwood asked in a deprecating voice, after a short time.

"Certainly not," he replied; and then I went back sadly to Isabel's room.

She had become violently excited. It was now twenty minutes past twelve. I had no comfort to give her. "Are they going to send to Clanmere?" she asked impatiently, turning round sharply upon me as I approached her.

"No," I answered, in a faltering voice. "Your uncle thinks he had better not."

"Then Uncle James thinks—oh, Heaven help me! —what does he think, Helen?" she cried. And as

she spoke the tears fell down upon her cheeks, and rolled in large drops down upon the fleecy lace and glistening satin. "My heart will burst if this goes on much longer. I have been so tried. I have borne so much for him. He should have spared me this!" She broke into a passionate wail of woe as she said this, and flung herself down upon the couch, crushing her veil and wreath—writhing in the agony of love and doubt, of dread and shame, that possessed her. I would not let my own tears fall. I could do nothing that could soothe her. All I could do was to put my cold hand on her fevered one, and press it lovingly.

Suddenly she started erect. "Helen," she began, "I have told you much, but not all about Gerald; once before he deceived me, and I forgave him. You did not know that?" I was not compelled to add to her humiliation by telling her that I did know it, therefore I held my peace. "But every one else knew it," she went on, her chest heaving, and her voice rising to a cry almost; "I would not break down then; and all these months I know Uncle James and Aunt Emily have been blaming themselves for giving way to my wishes; and now it will kill me." The clock struck one. "For mercy's sake go down again," she exclaimed, starting up. "Keep every one from me—keep away yourself, till you can tell me he is come. I shall go mad if I am not left alone."

Once more I went away on my hopeless mission. Some people whom I knew stopped me before I reached the door of the room in which the Hazelwoods were still alone. "Miss Archer," the lady said, "we feel that really, under the circumstances, it will be better for us to order our carriages and go away quietly."

"Already?" I asked bitterly.

She shrugged her shoulders. "We really think so;" she replied; "of course we hope for the best; but really, the position is so very painful;—the Hazelwoods are very much to be pitied, and so is poor Miss Verney;—but some people have foreseen this."

"I will say good morning to you at once," I said coldly. Then I went in to take further counsel with poor Mrs. Hazelwood, who by this time was weeping almost as bitterly as the insulted bride-elect. We formed a thousand plans, abandoned them, and formed others. We hoped, we suggested, we excused. All in vain. The hours crept on. Twice I had been up to Isabel's door, which was locked, and had been refused admittance by her.

"You shall leave me alone," she said the last time I knocked. "I dare not see any one yet, Helen; you don't know what this is; it's worse than death."

At three o'clock the house was deserted by all but the regular inhabitants. For the last hour we had obeyed Isabel's injunction, and had left her "alone" to battle with that agony which she had declared to be worse than death. During that hour I had remained with Mr. and Mrs. Hazelwood, for all reserve on the subject was banished now, and they spoke freely before me and to me of the insulting wrong that had been offered to their child. They blamed themselves in words that went to my heart, for that touch of weakness in their love for her which had induced them to consent to the renewal of the engagement which had once been broken. Blamed themselves, because they would suffer no shadow of their blame to fall on the poor, loving, betrayed, obstinate girl, who was wrestling with her sorrow alone up stairs.

"It broke her health and altered her temper the first time," poor Mrs. Hazelwood said at last.

"By Heaven's help it shall not break her heart now," her husband answered; "all that love and care and change of scene can do, shall be done."

"Ah! my dear, such love and care as this, faithful as it is, will never heal this wound, or fill this gap," the old lady said to him tenderly; "the more we cherish and prize her, the more she will feel that she has been slighted and scorned and slapped by the hand she prized and cherished most!"

"I must insist on my child seeing me and speaking to me now," Mr. Hazelwood said in answer to this, rising up slowly as he spoke. "Come, Emily, let us go to her; alone, Miss Archer; not even you must see this meeting." He put his hand kindly on my shoulder, as he led his wife past me, and I stood back reverentially almost, for theirs was a great sorrow.

A hush had fallen over the house, and through the silence that reigned I heard him knock at Isabel's door. Then he leant over the banisters and called impatiently, "Send a locksmith here; she can't open the door;" and then I forgot his request that I should remain below, and ran up to join them. "She cannot open the door," Mrs. Hazelwood said, getting hold of my hand and looking at me with frightened eyes, and I asked in a whisper—

"Did she tell you so?"

"No!—yes, she said something. Ah!" this was a sigh of mingled terror and relief, as the door gave way and we got into the room.

Isabel was standing by a table in the window that commanded the avenue, leaning against the table, evidently requiring its support. She moved her head slowly and with an effort as we approached her, and her lips moved, but I did not hear any words. The fair beauty of her face was gone, altogether gone. Not marred and disfigured by passion, but gone as utterly as if she had never been any other than the haggard woman we now looked upon. Of the misery, the pain, the hopelessness there was in her eyes as she turned them upon us, I can give no adequate idea.

We did not speak to her. We were wise in that. We did not torture her with words then. Her uncle took her in his arms, and moved her from the window, and as he did so, she threw back one wild despairing glance along the avenue by which he had promised to come. "She is cold as death!" Mr. Hazelwood said, as he placed her on the sofa; and as he placed her she remained, making no movement to attain ease or rest,

but just stayiug in the crumpled-up position which her helplessness had obliged him to place her in.

We took off her wreath and veil very gently, and the hours went by, and we thought she was resting and praying, for her eyes were closed and her hands were clasped. But just as the sun was sinking she rose up with a suddenness that startled away the possibility of our attempting to stop her, and went over to the window once more. Then she turned away nearly blind and staggering, and when we caught her in our arms we knew that the tension had been too great, and that now it was nearly over.

So she died, just as the day did, the day to which she had looked forward with such wearing fluctuations of feeling for a year. I can give no record of the time that followed. She was dead! Suddenly that fair beautiful thing that was lying on the couch was taken from us, and colder hands moved it about, and colder lips named it, and we were nothing. We were only "permitted" by the old nurse to remain in the room.

Rumours came to us before we could go away from the place which had been the scene of that terrible life and death struggle, that the man on whose head her blood rests, had gone away from Clanmere the night before that fatal day. Strangers rent his place now, and he has never been heard of since Isabel died for him. It is still a heart-sickening mystery, whether his conduct was caused by wanton cruelty, by the consequences of some former crime committed by him, or by madness. It is hard to believe that insanity could have so deliberately planned such treachery.

LAST CHRISTMAS AT CLEEVE.

FIFTEEN years ago I had been a pupil of Mr. Luttrell's, the rector of Cleeve. I had called him "old Luttrell" then, both in monologues addressed to myself, and confidences addressed to boys of my own age. I had also been in the habit of deriding the efforts he made to instruct me in the dead languages, and the efforts Mrs. Luttrell made to render the rectory like a home to me amongst others. Nevertheless, now when I got their cordial joint invitation to "come down and spend the Christmas week at Cleeve," I promptly accepted it, and reminded myself that Luttrell's years did not place him beyond the pale of human sympathy even now, and that the rectory had not, after all, been so unhome-like a residence as to be revisited with anything but pleasure.

I had only just returned to England, after an absence of many years, when this note bidding me to Cleeve reached me. During those years circumstances had altered with me. I had gone to Italy as a civil engineer, to aid in the construction of a railway that was designed to unite Rome and some of the lesser Italian

cities more closely. I had gone off to the blue Mediterranean in my elder brother's yacht. My mother had sobbed over the parting with me, the cadet of the house; and, amidst her sobs, had time to warn me against the papistical seductions of the Eternal City. My father had interspersed his farewell speech with cautions relative to miasma and the Pontine Marshes. That was nine years ago. I was a happy young fellow then, with many to care for me. Now father, mother, and brother were all dead, and I had come back the cadet of the house no longer, to reign in the place of the bright-faced boy, my senior by one year, who had taken me out to my labours in the south in his beautiful toy, "La Reine."

Some unaccountable delusion, some misty remembrance of the time when I really believed in the season as a thing to be joyfully anticipated, caused me to quit my Italian quarters, and come back to England about the 18th of December. I had no one to welcome me —no one to go to—no one whom I could ask to come to me. The novelty of my position and my youth must be my excuse when I say that, under these adverse circumstances, I still had the temerity to announce myself as "arrived at the St. James's Hotel, Piccadilly," through the medium of the "Morning Post." There I determined to stay until the season of universal domestic hilarity was over. Not even the flush of novelty could dazzle me into going down to the old home of which I was master now, while the fervour of the spirit of Christmas-time was over the land. I knew that I should be a boy again when I came to see the old things, all of them sanctified to me by association with the mother I had adored, and the father and brother between whom and myself there had always been the frankest, fondest affection. I could not go and see the old things and old servants yet; so I determined to stay on and be miserably luxurious and comfortable, and to take "mine ease at mine inn."

The hotel was not very fully occupied just then. Its

waiters, consequently, had plenty of time to devote to my service and comfort. For two or three days I endeavoured to persuade myself that I was very happy and contented here, "taking mine ease at mine inn," while other people were compelled by conventionality to assume interests and enthusiasms which they did not feel. But the hollow pretence wherewith I had deceived, or attempted to deceive, no one save myself, broke through utterly as Christmas-day approached, and I began to wish heartily that some one of my own blood and kindred would remember me, and solicit me to grace his board on the coming day of universal peace and good-will.

Desolation deepened. During the first three days of my stay at the hotel I had at least the sense of companionship which constant chance meetings with fellow-sojourners and sufferers on the staircase gives a man. There had been a colossal cattle-show held in the great market, hard by Camden Town. London had been reeking, so to say, with agriculturists of every grade, who apparently, with one consent, had journeyed due north daily—journeyed with a oneness of purpose that was symptomatic of that "beef on the brain" which has won its recognition as a national complaint from the pen of Mr. George Sala. The squirearchy of the land were well represented at the St. James's. But as the 25th approached they returned to their flocks and herds and families. And as I watched them departing in rapid succession—their cabs, in most cases, groaning under the weight of hampers from Fortnam and Mason's—I realised more forcibly than I had done before that I was very much alone; and as I realised this truth, I saddened over it.

This being my mood, it was but a small marvel that I should have received and read the Luttrells' letter, inviting me to join their family party at Cleeve, with the liveliest pleasure. That announcement in the "Morning Post," made in the ardour of youth, without sufficient cause, had quickly borne fruit. They

had seen it, and had acted upon it in "a manner worthy of their unceasing kindness," I told myself in a gush of good feeling, though in what way their kindness had been ceaselessly manifested towards me I should have been at a loss to describe had I been put to the test. However, the phrase did as well as another. Accordingly, I used it in my letter of acceptance, and did not stay to analyse the truth of it as I drove about eagerly in search of such novelties of the season as would, I imagined, be most welcome to the family in Cleeve Rectory.

I had nearly forgotten the personal appearance of my former tutor, and of each member of his family, until I received this agreeable reminder. But now my memory refreshed itself, and on my journey down to Cleeve, on the 23rd, I conjured up tolerably correct visions of them all; the bland, portly Rector, who loved the classics so well that he was never happy unless he had his house full of little boys to whom he could impart them, at the rate of £100 per annum a-piece; the excellent manager and lady his wife, who never let the want that was the ruling power in that house be obvious to those who did not dwell therein; the four or five little girls who had been magnificently petted or overlooked by all the boys, according to the respective natures of these latter. "Why, they must be young women now," I thought, and then I remembered that they were pretty.

Lastly, I thought of the house. While my mind was undergoing a course of instruction and improvement within it, I had regarded it with scorn as the embodiment of age and discomfort. It had been a monastery—that is to say, some portions of it were portions of the original building, but the part that the family and the boys inhabited when I was there as a pupil was comparatively modern, and unconditionally ugly. There had been a splendid old shell of a chapel with a richly-groined roof standing at the extreme end of the disused side of the house I remembered, and I

caught myself pitying the poverty and despising the taste which had permitted the Luttrells to disregard the claims such a fine piece of good Gothic architecture had to being restored and renovated. Pity gained the day, as I reflected how awfully hard pressed the man must have been for money for immediate need who could suffer such a place as Cleeve Rectory and its grounds to continue in shabby decay.

The train by which I was going down was to arrive at Gollington Gate at 5.10. Cleeve was just three miles from the station, and so my first thought when I got out was to secure a fly, for I remembered that there had been a lack of locomotive power in the old days at the rectory. Before my portmanteau could be transferred from the porter's back to the fly, I was made to understand that time had changed circumstances. A groom in charge of a four-wheeled dog-cart arrested my attention and portmanteau, and gave me to understand that the four-wheeled dog-cart and pair of bright Scotch chestnuts were at my service, through Mr. Luttrell's grace.

I was at the entrance-gate of the Luttrells' grounds in less than twenty minutes, and the first glance into them showed me more plainly still that time had been very good to them. They were extensive, undulating grounds—they had been unkempt wildernesses, when I left them—well planted, well kept, well cared for. They prepared me for the even greater change which had come over the old house. The whole of the exterior had been restored, to be in keeping with the old chapel, which I now saw was brilliantly lighted.

I went in,—in to the midst of strangers. My old tutor was portly and bland still, but his blandness was no longer that of a man who cannot afford to be otherwise. Mrs. Luttrell was a handsomer, younger-looking woman than she had been fifteen years ago. Perhaps she owed a little of her comeliness and youthfulness to the sweeping black velvet dress and softly-falling delicate white lace that nestled about her head and throat.

But she owed still more, I thought, to the absence of the look of watchful, wary care from which I had never before seen her face free. As for the five little girls, they were five rather striking-looking young women now, and as I stood bowing before them, and responding to their graceful words of welcome, I congratulated myself more heartily than ever on that happy thought which had induced me to let the readers of the "Morning Post" know that "Gerald Brandon, Esq.," had "arrived from Rome at the St. James's Hotel, Piccadilly."

We sat for about an hour in what had been the schoolroom. Had been the schoolroom! It was difficult to remember that it had ever served such a purpose. A marble chimney-piece supported by handsomely-carved serpentine pillars, reigned in the place of the battered smoke-darkened "blower" that had been put up to add to our comfort during the hours of education. A velvet pile carpet had displaced the old frayed cocoa-nut matting; couches and easy chairs, spider tables, ormolu and old china, rare odours from rare flowers in the conservatory adjoining were around me. The room was fraught with these and similar things. Still it lacked the saving grace of the art I had learnt to understand and appreciate in Italy. The only thing my taste warmed to in the midst of the splendour in which we were seated was a bronze bull, and of that Mrs. Luttrell showed her appreciation by using it as a door-weight.

"It will explain itself in time," I thought, as I followed in the wake of a footman, when that hour was passed and Mrs. Luttrell signified that it was time to dress for dinner.

There had been a brief colloquy between her and the master of the house as she hinted this. "Won't you wait for Georgie?" he had asked. "You know her train doesn't get in till seven."

"I really thought it foolish to alter the dinner hour, Richard," Mrs. Luttrell had replied, with the same sort of suave bitterness she had been wont to develop to-

wards the scholars who had asked twice for meat of old.

"Mr. Brandon has had a long day of it, you must remember, papa," I heard the eldest Miss Luttrell say reproachfully as I went out of the room; and I thought her a very nice girl for her consideration, for I did not know who Georgie was, and I happened to be hungry.

The old chapel of the monastery had been renovated, and turned into a modern dining-room in a way that was well worthy of its original designer. It was really magnificently done. Lavers and Barraud had put in the windows, and the furniture was from some equally correct ecclesiastical firm. We dined *à la Russe*, at a round flower and fern-adorned table, that was but a spec in the wide expanse of Turkey-carpeted floor. And as we dined I wondered more and more how it had all been done. For there were no shortcomings. This was no violent effort made to dazzle me—the eligible guest. As we were to-day they had evidently been accustomed to be for such a length of time that the novelty had quite worn itself off for them. Could it be the tithes or the tutoring that had told so well? Now that I was back in the place, I remembered its old sordidness much more vividly than I had ever down before—remembered it in spite of, perhaps by reason of, the luxury that so surrounded us, and seemed to try to shut out the memory of the past.

Looked at by the light of many wax-candles, seen through the glimmer of plate and glass and the glamour of flowers, the Miss Luttrells were very pretty. They were marvellously alike—alike in person, and mode of speech, and thought, and manner. They had all apparently taken their elder sister as the fitting type for them to emulate, and they had all succeeded in resembling her very closely. They wore the same sort of ornaments, they said the same set sentences, they thought exactly the same about every picture, book, or contemporaneous event that was mentioned. I began

to hope long before dinner was over that the expected "Georgie" would prove to be possessed of more individuality than the five Miss Luttrells could boast of between them, as otherwise my time at Cleeve Rectory would hang heavy on my hands.

Even before she came this Georgie seemed to be a discordant note in the otherwise harmonious strain. "Where shall you lodge Georgie, my dear?" Mr. Luttrell asked when we were left alone at dessert.

Mrs. Luttrell nodded her head sententiously as she replied that "Georgie would be very well taken care of."

"I suppose," Mr. Luttrell said hesitatingly, "that the same room she had when she was here before couldn't be managed—eh?" And then the lady of the house frowned and nodded at her husband in a way that betrayed to me that I was the occupant of the room Mr. Luttrell had alluded to.

"Georgie Deane will have the step-room," Miss Luttrell said coldly to her father. "She will be more comfortable there, I should think, than if she felt she was in the way of any of our arrangements."

"I should think so," emphatically chorused her four sisters.

Georgie Deane! I remembered her now—remembered her clearly, though for fifteen years I had neither seen her nor heard her name. She flashed back upon me as her name was spoken,—a beautiful child of seven or eight on a pony that was as handsome as a dream. She had been a sort of princess to my boyish mind,—the realised ideal of wealth and loveliness. How could the Luttrells speak of her so indifferently, I thought, as I remembered the fact,—namely, that Georgie Deane was the adopted child, the acknowledged heiress, of the richest people in the whole circle of the Luttrells' acquaintance,—the richest people in the county in which Cleeve was situated, in fact. The step-room—my own barren dormitory of old—good enough for Georgie Deane! The cold

air and the sparkling wines had surely told upon my head.

A little later the ladies left us. Mrs. Luttrell beneficently hinting, as she wafted her five daughters away, that if I carried out the "delightfully civilised foreign custom," and accompanied them, she would not think the worse of me. But I, being desirous of solving the Georgie mystery, doggedly remained behind, in spite of her assurance that "I had a mind that would appreciate such music as her dear girls were prepared to delight my ears with."

I stayed behind to very little purpose. The adroit cross-questioning to which I subjected my former master, elicited nothing beyond the bare statement that the "Georgie" who was come,—or coming,—to-night, was indeed no other than the pretty little child on the prancing pony who had made her infantile calls on the Luttrells' in almost regal state of old. "Eh! you remember her, do you?" said Mr. Luttrell. "Yes,—she was a pretty child, an uncommonly pretty child." Then, just as I hoped that he was going to enlarge on the topic, and state whether or not she had fulfilled that early promise of beauty, Mr. Luttrell looked apologetically at me, and said it was dole-night. "My poor always come up on the night of the 23rd of December for the annual doles, and I must go and see it given. Will you come with me?"

"No, thank you," I replied, "I think I will join the ladies." So he went off alone to superintend the distribution of the Cleeve dole, and I made my way along the metamorphosed passages to the drawing-room.

For a minute or two I thought it was untenanted. Then I heard a rustling sound, and looking over in the direction from which that sound proceeded, I saw a young lady gathering herself up from a recumbent position in a corner that was rather in the shade. In a moment I saw that it was not one of the Miss Luttrells. In another moment I saw that it was none other than Georgie.

I was fresh from the land of full-eyed, grandly-formed, massive-browed women. I had come to associate beauty chiefly with the cleanly-cut profile, and rather long-nosed, oval face, which is the common attribute of the Roman woman of nearly every grade. But as this graceful creature gathered herself up from the couch, I felt that there might be more fascination in another type, more brightness, even more power. She came out from the shade, away into the full light of the chandelier under which I was standing, holding out her hand to me and saying—"You are Mr. Brandon. I must recall myself to your memory, for I knew you very well when you were a boy and I was a little girl. The Luttrells might have been quite sure I should effect the introduction for myself, since they left me alone to do it," she continued, laughing, as I replied that "I believed I was addressing Miss Deane." "Yes," she said in answer to this question, "my name is left to me still." Something like a shade fell over the bright face as she spoke; and as she averted her eyes and gazed absently down on the centre vase full of flowers, I had an opportunity of looking at her.

There was no regular beauty after all. The bent head was covered with dark shining, chesnut hair—luxuriant hair that looked all the more luxuriant, perhaps, by reason of the loose way in which it was wrapped about her head and kept in place by a plain jet comb. The great grey eyes were set deeply under a straight, wide brow. A delicate nose that would evidently turn up a little when she lifted her head, and a splendidly-cut, clever wide mouth, the lips of which parted presently in a broad smile, were there. This was her face, and it was fair enough; but it was her shape, her glorious, graceful, full, yet supple shape that struck me most.

"My name is left to me still." I caught myself pondering over these words, and wondering what they meant. Many other things seemed to be left to her, for she was handsomely, even richly dressed for so

young a woman, and her beautiful, slender white hands were heavily weighted with rings. I wasted time in these ponderings, and before I could speak to her again the eldest Miss Luttrell came back hastily into the room.

"I really beg your pardon, Mr. Brandon, for leaving you alone in this way," she began in her low-toned, carefully-subdued voice, "but papa likes us to go down and speak to the poor on this night. He is very much annoyed with you, Georgie, for not coming," she added, turning to the young lady, whose face was held up again now with all the shade gone from it.

"Is he really?" Miss Deane asked, in an amused tone. "Well, I'll explain to him when he comes in, that my hardened heart counsels me not to go and joyously gaze upon the recipients of the dole, as if I didn't want it just as much as they do."

Miss Luttrell merely looked blank, calm reprobation of this speech, and then addressed me. "Will you come and see the people, Mr. Brandon? It really is a pretty sight; mamma sent me to ask you."

"I shall be very happy," I said, hoping that Miss Deane would come too. But as I followed Miss Luttrell from the room, I saw Georgie making her way back to the couch from which she had risen when I entered it. We walked slowly along to the scene of the distribution of the dole, and as we went my curiosity respecting the change which had come over all things was partly set at rest. The eldest Miss Luttrell was very lucid in her statement; it seemed to me that she made it almost officially.

"It is very strange of Georgie,—almost bad taste, I think,—to separate herself from us all in this way, don't you think so?"

"I can hardly call her coming here to spend Christmas 'separating herself' from you all," I said.

"Her coming was almost a matter of necessity," Miss Luttrell said, rather spitefully. "She wouldn't come near Cleeve if she had any other place to go to. Mamma

is so kind and thoughtful that she would invite Georgie here for the holidays, though she knows it does not add to our pleasure."

"The poor heiress! is she so desolate?" I asked.

"Heiress! What do you mean? Oh! I suppose you are thinking of the Sawles. Yes, they did mean to leave her something, but she wore out their patience as she grew up, and,—of course it's very painful for us,—when they died everything was left to papa and us. Georgie Deane is out as a governess. Isn't it a pretty sight?"

"Charming," I said, for we had come into the servants' hall, the upper end of which was occupied by the Luttrell family, all of them beaming with charity. They were giving out money done up in silver paper, and loaves of bread, to the aged and the needy of the parish of Cleeve. They were winning the kindliest consideration and the heartiest regard which "their poor" were capable of feeling; winning it by means of that money which the Sawles had left them. No wonder that the poor girl up stairs had refused to come down and see the distribution of the dole.

There was plenty of room for me on the temporary platform on which the Luttrells were sitting, but Mrs. Luttrell swept her dress aside, and blinked and nodded her desire to me that I should take this place by her side. "This is a sweet sight," she whispered, as one old crone after another came up and was servile at the foot of the Luttrell throne. "My dear girls delight in this. Ah! Mr. Brandon, we have always taught them to consider others before themselves." She shook her head pensively as she spoke, and looked at them all so admiringly that I felt impelled to say—

"Don't you think they are leaving Miss Deane alone rather too long?"

"Oh! dear no! She chooses most perversely to absent herself from this little ceremony: besides, we make no stranger of her," Mrs. Luttrell said, sharply.

"I have just heard of her cruel reverse of fortune

from Miss Luttrell," I said, abruptly. "How brightly she seems to bear it."

"If she were like those dear, sensitive girls of mine, the sad thoughts of how she must have pained her kind patrons before they could have so strongly marked their displeasure, would subdue what you call her brightness," Mrs. Luttrell said, waving her head backwards and forwards. "She was a sad trial to those dear Sawles—a sad, sad trial. What poor Mrs. Sawle would have done after her husband's death had it not been for that dear, good, unselfish girl of mine, Caroline, I do not know; but Caroline was Mrs. Sawle's right hand, her only comfort; consequently, Miss Deane is pleased to regard Caroline as her enemy."

I could have wrung the neck of the prosperous pharisee—the self-satisfied mother at my side. It was borne in upon me clearly and strongly as she spoke that Georgie Deane had been worsted by these people. And though they were my most hospitable entertainers, it was borne in upon me too with equal strength that she had been unfairly worsted. My interest in the distribution of the dole was so very laxly felt and feebly portrayed after this, that Mrs. Luttrell quickly proposed a return to the drawing-room. "Our little parochial excitements seem tame to you after your life abroad,' she said, rising up. "Come, dears," she added to her daughters, "we must remember that these things are not near to Mr. Brandon's heart as they are to ours."

I might have felt rebuked by this speech if I had not had those doubts about Miss Deane in my mind. As it was, I began to distrust these Luttrells root and branch—to distrust them and their air of being united in the beautiful bonds of family affection, and, consequently to care very little whether Mrs. Luttrell meant to rebuke me or not.

Looking at it in the light cast by the revelations of the Luttrells themselves, I saw a good deal that was condemnatory of the family conduct in Mr. Luttrell's

manner towards his fair young guest when he at last came in. He dwelt at rather tiresome length on her goodness in coming, and his pleasure at seeing her. She waited until he had quite finished, and then she answered in a way that showed me she wished her words to be well heeded by them all. "I would not have missed coming to Cleeve this Christmas for all the wealth I once thought was to be my own," she said, as blithely as if the loss of wealth was a very minor evil in her eyes. "Mrs. Luttrell gave me the option of retracting my long-given promise and staying away, you know," she continued, with a low laugh.

Mrs. Luttrell and her eldest daughter looked at each other as the visitor spoke.

"Mamma took the expensive journey into consideration, Georgie," Miss Luttrell said in an explanatory tone. "A dull country village has no charms for you; we remembered that."

"Ah! well, I counted the cost and came," Miss Deane said, carelessly. "I don't think I shall find Cleeve dull by any means this Christmas."

The evening was a laboured one after this. The hours lagged in spite of the Miss Luttrells' unceasing efforts at the piano. The sisters all played and sang, and all feigned to take the greatest delight in playing and singing for its own sake. Certainly I offered them no incentives to continue wearying themselves and others, for I was absorbed, utterly absorbed, in Georgie Deane.

I felt something like compunction the next morning for the indifference I had suffered myself to manifest towards the daughters of the house. By way of compensation I did violence to my taste and inclination, and volunteered to accompany Miss Luttrell in a tour round the grounds in search of holly berries, and the few winter flowers that were still uncut. We were away a long time, a wearisome time it was to me, for my fancy was caught and chained by Miss Deane. I chafed terribly at the delay when Caroline Luttrell would pause to consider its decorative qualities before

cutting an evergreen or a bloom. I wearied for a return to the house, from which we seemed to get further away every moment. I took a savage pleasure in enlarging on Miss Deane's matchless grace and peculiar beauty, declaring at last, in revenge for Caroline's measured steps, that Miss Deane possessed what not one Englishwoman in a thousand was blessed with—individuality, and a manner of her own.

"Not the best manner in the world for a governess to have," she said, quietly. "Shall we go back to the house and arrange these now, Mr. Brandon?"

As we went back to the house we met Mrs. Luttrell coming to look for us. My hostess was flushed and agitated, but suave as ever as she spoke;—"My dear Caroline," she began, "we want your head in the house. She is my prop and stay, Mr. Brandon. More of our friends have arrived, you must go in. As I am out I should like to show Mr. Brandon the way I have laid out my rose-garden."

She compelled me to go back with her to look at a stiff common-place piece of ground between high holly hedges. I marvelled at her tactics the while, for I had been telling myself the whole morning that it was obviously their plan to throw me much in the company of, and finally marry me to, their much-praised eldest daughter. Presently Mrs. Luttrell ruthlessly uprooted this idea. "I am sure you will forgive me for robbing you of your companion, but Sir Percy Holdsworth has come, and Caroline and he are old friends, and probably will have much to say to each other."

She said this so significantly that I was justified in asking, "Am I to congratulate you on your daughter's engagement?"

"Well, not yet; we cannot allow it to be hinted at yet, for my dear child is one of those sensitive plants who would shrink away from all mention of such a thing; but we cannot be blind to his hopes; besides, it was the dear, dying wish of our esteemed friend Mrs. Sawle; he was such a favourite of hers, and she was so

attached to Caroline, that it was but natural that she should pray for their union."

"How did Miss Deane lose that old lady's favour?" I asked. "Ah," Mrs. Luttrell said, shaking her head, "I fear if I were to tell you it would not raise your opinion of Miss Deane. She is a pushing, presuming girl; she has come here now, almost forced herself here, though she knows it cannot be pleasant to Sir Percy as an old friend of the Sawles to see her;—so different to my children; she frightens them. 'Why, mamma, we can't understand it,' they say. I only hope she may not have a bad influence over them." When she had said this, and heard that I thought the arrangement of the stumps, which marked the place where the standard roses had been, "perfect," Mrs Luttrell suffered me to escort her back to the house, where she left me in peace at last.

"Caroline, and Fanny, and Sir Percy are going to ride over to Playford, mamma," one of the younger girls came forward to exclaim as we got into the hall; "we have not half holly enough,—they are going to order some more." Mrs. Luttrell acquiesced in the arrangement, proposing as an amendment that I should join this riding party. But I pleaded "letters to write" as an excuse for remaining behind and seeing more of Miss Deane.

I did see more of her. I saw enough of her during that day and the three following ones to make me resolve to stake my chances of happiness upon her. She had such a winning beauty, and she did so openly bemoan having, "after all," to go and be a governess, that I could but sigh to make her my wife. She confided in me, too, telling me the story of the way in which the Luttrells had stepped in between herself and the people who had almost ruined her young life,—telling me how bitter her disappointment, how great her rage against them had been at first,—telling me much about herself, in fact, but not all,—not quite all.

"You wonder at me for coming here, don't you, after all I have said against them?" she said to me one morning.

"I did wonder,—now I only rejoice, for I have met you."

She blushed fiercely as I said this, and looked at me with such anxious, pitying eyes, that I almost believed for a moment that our positions must be reversed,—that she was the prosperous lady still, and I some one's defrauded heir. But the expression altered before I could analyse it, and she said,—"Some day or other I'll explain my reason to you for coming, but I can't now. What do you think of Carrie Luttrell? Would you marry her if you had the chance of marrying her?"

There was a genuine, almost a child-like eagerness in her way of asking this that made me clearly understand she was not thinking of me at the time. It was a painful conviction to be brought home to a man by a girl he was so nearly loving as I was loving her. "No,—a thousand times," I answered.

"No! Once will do,—I'm so glad," she said simply, heaving a little sigh after she had said it. "Oh, dear! this is a long, long, weary week, isn't it, Mr. Brandon?"

"Are you longing for the festivities of the twenty-eighth?" I said, with the bitterness of a man who cares for nothing save the presence of the adored one.

"Yes, I am longing for it,—that is the right phrase,—longing to fight and triumph." She went away from me as she said this, leaving me rather unhappy, and very much puzzled.

I was so infatuated with her that I literally took no heed of what was passing around me. Now I remember that when the Miss Luttrells came home from their ride to Playford on Christmas Eve they were not accompanied by Sir Percy Holdsworth. Then I scarcely noticed the fact, for I was watching Georgie Deane. I heard from one of the girls that "Sir Percy had asked Carrie for the first dance at their ball on

the twenty-eighth." So I supposed he was coming; but, truth to tell, I thought very little about him. I was occupied wholly and solely in thinking of Georgie. Anxious as I was to secure her, I did not want the awkwardness of a young engagement while we were staying at Cleeve. Accordingly I deferred speaking the words that were necessary, in spite of the kind and marked manner in which the Luttrells gave me a dozen opportunities a day of doing so.

At length, on the morning before their ball, Mrs. Luttrell spoke to me, acting as the temporary guardian of the young lady I was singling out and rendering so conspicuous by my attentions. In plain English, she asked me "what I meant." In plain English, I told her that I meant a speedy marriage, if Miss Deane would have me. Speaking to me as my mother might have done, she said, she strenuously advised my settling it that day,—that very day.

I was only too glad to endeavour to act upon her advice. I did not stay to attempt to find out the reason why it was given. After all, I had wronged this lady and her daughters, I told myself. In the depths of my heart they had stood accused of the venial crime of trying to entangle me in a matrimonial engagement with one of themselves. Whereas it was proved that they had cherished no thought of the kind; or, if they had cherished such a thought, that they had amiably relinquished it on behalf of Georgie Deane.

For all the want of prudent forethought and the utter absence of reasonable reflection I had shown in falling captive to Miss Deane's charms with such celerity, I was essentially a practical man. During the hour that intervened between Mrs. Luttrell's leaving me and my seeking Miss Deane, I arranged a clear verbal statement of my affairs and position, and settled determinately what I could give to my wife if I lived, what I could leave to my widow if I died. I even went so far in making my plans for the future as to

write to a London architect with whom I had some slight acquaintance, asking him to go down to Brandon Lodge and send me an estimate of what a new drawing-room and conservatory would cost. This letter I left open, meaning to show it to Georgie when she had accepted me, and given me the right to claim her interest in my home. "She may suggest a new boudoir, or something of that sort," I thought, as I made my way to the room in which Mrs. Luttrell had promised me I "should find Georgie alone about one."

The four days we had passed together at Cleeve Rectory had ripened my intimacy with this sweet stranger amazingly. She was a girl who was inevitably soon closely regarded by a man towards whom she showed friendly feeling. There was something contagious about her bright, free frankness. There was something irresistible in her candour. There was something thrillingly flattering in her kindness,—in the confidential way she had of congratulating and bewailing herself openly. I had never been guilty of the coxcomb's course with any woman. I had never thought any lady who honoured me with her notice over-ready to "meet my views" and marry me. But as I sought her presence this morning I did feel tolerably sure that Georgie Deane liked me with the liking that rapidly develops into love when love is declared legitimate. I was just as far from feeling any fear as to the issue, as I was from being over-confident about it. I blessed the fate which had made this girl, whom I loved so well already, ready to love me. That was all.

I found her alone, as I had been told I should find her,—alone through no collusion with the Luttrells I quickly discovered. She was sitting on the fender-stool close to the fire as I entered, trying to read, shielding her flushed rounded cheek from the blaze with one pretty hand. She threw the book down as I approached her, and leant forward slightly to meet me. "I am so glad you've come," she began; "I was

just getting to find it all unendurable. Those people can't be dressing for their ball at this hour of the day. What are they doing? I can't get hold of one of them, and any companionship would have been better than my own thoughts this morning."

"Try mine in default of better."

"I don't believe I could have any better," she said gravely, shaking her head; and then I went near to her, full of my purpose, loving her so dearly, that the longing to tell her so nearly choked me. In a moment a self-reproachful, sorrowful look flashed across her face, and she had risen up, and was standing by my side, reddening one instant, and paling the next, under the influence of some intense emotion.

"Your companionship will be very good for me," she began, her voice trembling a little. "I want to tell some honest, true friend what I am doing. I will tell you."

"Let me tell you something first, Georgie," I said, imploringly, for I felt suddenly as if she were slipping away from me.

"No, no, no; ladies first," she interrupted. "Sit down there,"—she indicated a chair at some little distance,—"and I'll make my confession walking about the room. I can do it better so, for I needn't look in your face then." I did as she commanded me, and she began;—"You shall hear what is the hardest part of it all for me to tell. I came down here this Christmas to win back a lover. What do you think of that?" She came and stood close opposite to me as she spoke, and I did not know what to think of "it," or of her. "Isn't it a humiliating confession?" she went on passionately. "However I tell you my tale, you won't think the cause sufficient excuse for my acting as I am acting; but you deserve to hear all I have to say, so I'll say it. Now, had I not better begin at the beginning?" I made a movement of assent, and she resumed. "You know how I was brought up,—adopted when I was two years old by the Sawles, who were

tired of poodles and parrots, and of their futile efforts to make anything human that had arrived at years of discretion love them. So they took me away from my poor consumptive, widowed mother, and pampered me for sixteen years. Then Percy Holdsworth and I fell in love with each other, and he wasn't a baronet then, and the Sawles set their faces against it, and the Luttrells, who had been undermining for some time, came to the surface, and blamed me openly, and called me 'ungrateful.'"

She quivered with anger as she said this; but I could not speak to soothe her, and she went on;—"It ended as such things always end,—in the weakest going to the wall. I offended the Sawles past all possibility of winning their forgiveness. Old Mrs. Sawle raged herself into an illness, and Caroline Luttrell came to nurse her, and I was treated like a naughty child who wanted to do something disgraceful. Percy was away at the time. I had no one to help me, so I got rash, and said I would go and stay with some of my mother's people. I had no idea that I was breaking all ties with the Sawles by doing this. No one warned me, no one tried to save me. They let me go, and then they sent fifty pounds and my piano, and said 'they had done with me.'"

She dropped her face down upon her hands and sobbed as she said this, and still my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth, and I could not comfort her, though I loved her so dearly.

"Oh, my life! my life after that, my sad, broken life! Mr. Brandon, I can never hope to make you understand all I had to go through. My uncle's family believed that I must have done something shameful to be cast off in such a way, and I fathomed that belief and would not condescend to explain to them how it really had been. Then, hardest of all, Percy did not seek me out. Perhaps he believed badly of me too. At any rate, I heard of him next as having come unexpectedly into the baronetcy through the

death of his cousin, and as being 'devoted to Miss Luttrell.' Devoted to Miss Luttrell! I will shatter that devotion. I have come here to do it; I will win him back to-night."

She spoke this last sentence so softly, it fell so musically upon my ears, after the burst of wild excitement in which she had uttered the preceding words, that I was reminded both of the tigress and the dove. By this time I had schooled myself into submission to the inevitable, so I obeyed the social burden that was on me to speak to the lady who had honoured me by reposing a painful confidence in me. "If he is worthy of you, Miss Deane, I will wish you all the success you can wish yourself," I said, with some effort. It did not seem to me on the face of it that any man who could have left her unsought for so long a time could be worthy of her.

She shook her head, and laughed half mournfully. "Sensible people would tell you that he was worthy of me, because I'm only a goose," she said. Then she added, impatiently, "What nonsense is talked about that same worthiness. He was a dear fellow five years ago, and I loved him because I loved him. Any way, he is too good for Carrie Luttrell. He shall not be condemned to pass his life with that piece of perfectly proper mediocrity. But I have more to tell you,—more folly you'll call it, very likely. The Luttrells invited me here ages ago,—long before they knew he was coming down here this Christmas. When they found he was coming they wrote to put me off, and gave, as a reason for doing so, their regard for my feelings; "it must be unpleasant for me to meet any friend of the Sawles," they said. I baffled them then, as I mean to do again. I have lost fortune and friends, through them; but I won't lose my lover. I baffled them with an utterly unexpected stroke of humility. I wrote back, and said, 'I would not presume to suppose that Sir Percy Holdsworth would be affected in any way by my presence, and as I had no

other place to go to, I would ask it of their kindness not to withdraw their invitation.' They couldn't help themselves after that. I came, and they're obliged to make the best of it. But if I don't conquer, oh, Mr. Brandon, I'm ruined!"

Her bright, beautiful, quick-moving face looked so grief-stricken, so horror-stricken, as she said this, that I actually started.

"I'm ruined!" she repeated.

"You have staked your happiness on this," I said as calmly as I could. It was far from pleasant to be compelled to calmly discuss her chances of winning another man with the lady I loved myself.

"My happiness?" she said interrogatively. "Yes," she added hastily, "my happiness, of course, and my comfort too. Do you know," she continued, confidingly coming to a sudden stand-still just in front of me again, "Percy used to think a great deal of a good appearance, and I gratified his taste. That is about the truth of it. Well, I didn't want to come and be shabby before him now, so I have spent every penny in getting things to look nice in. What do you think of me?"

"Think!" I cried; "why, I think that a man who could care what you are dressed in is,—can't be——"

"Worthy of me," she interrupted. "That is a romantic view of it, and I don't want you to be romantic. You know very well indeed, Mr. Brandon, that if I looked shabby and dowdy, you, amongst others, would not rank my worthy merits quite so highly as you do now. At any rate, whether it's a mistake or not, I have made it. I shall know to-night."

There was silence between us for several minutes after she said this. Then I broke it by saying, "I do not know what motive may have impelled you to tell me this, Miss Deane; but at least I may wish you success and happiness." She held her hand out to me,—she bent her head forward towards me,—she inclined to me so kindly, so sweetly, so bewilderingly in this hour of my agony.

"Oh! you do know why I have told you," she said hastily. "You do. I am sure, whatever I may be, that I am not deceived in you." I had nothing more to say then. My dream of joy was rudely dispersed. I went out of the room, and in the hall I met Mrs. Luttrel. "Well!" she said eagerly. "My dear Mr. Brandon, it is settled."

"I have not proposed to Miss Deane, if you mean that," I said, brushing past her as quickly as I could. I had been too terribly bruised to resume shape as a polite and well mannered young man immediately.

I did not see Georgie again until we met at dinner. Judging from her countenance then, she had passed an even harder time of it than I had done. The Luttrells were all cool to her. But she did not seem to heed that coolness very much. She was wrapped up in her own thoughts, and they did not appear to be pleasant ones. In spite of my own bitter disappointment, I did so heartily pity my darling at this crisis of her fate.

The Luttrells had collected the whole county to grace their ball, it seemed to me. It was late before I entered the ball-room, and Sir Percy Holdsworth was the first man to whom Miss Luttrell introduced me. When I saw him I pitied my darling,—my poor misguided, passionate darling,—still more.

He was the perfect type of the effete, conceited man of idleness and fashion,—bland, well-grown, and unutterably selfish and self-satisfied. I knew that he was all these things as soon as we met, and my heart burned within me to think of how unworthy he was of the fate that was offered to him,—the fate that I so coveted.

She came into the ball-room,—that bright fate of mine,—a little later than I did myself. She came in looking so brilliant, so radiant, so beautiful, that more than I was dazzled by her. I saw their meeting. I saw him explaining, and excusing himself, and pleading, and being won by her. Saw it all even more plainly than the Luttrells did, though their vision was sharpened by envy and malice. Further on in the evening, I

saw that the fair understanding she had fought for had come about between them. And then I cursed the folly which had made me announce myself in the Morning Post as returned to England.

She herself told me the next morning that "it was all settled." "I have got engaged to him again," she said. "At least I never was engaged to him before, but I have passed five years of my life in thinking about him. That is a long time,—a big slice out of a woman's life. It would be a pity to waste it, wouldn't it, Mr. Brandon? He was my beau ideal. When I get used to him, he will be my beau ideal again. Wish me joy,—do!"

I wished her joy honestly, but I could not hope she would have much of it when I saw how indifferently he accepted his good fortune. He came to luncheon with the Luttrells the day after their ball, and gladdened their hearts by making his marriage a secondary consideration to a tour in the East which he had promised to make the following summer with an artist friend of his.

"While you are away I could teach some little children their A B C," Georgie said, in answer to a surmise of his as to where it would be well for her to sojourn during his absence.

"I suppose you have some friends who could have you to stay with them, haven't you?" he said, complainingly. "If you haven't it will be an awful bore." She had passed me over for love of him, and love of power and revenge; but my heart ached for her as he said this. She was stung, too, by the pleasure the Luttrells could not help showing that they felt at her discomfiture. But I could not help her. She had put herself beyond the pale where my sympathy would have availed her.

Thank Heaven, that Christmas week for which I was bound to Cleeve came to an end at last. I said "good-bye" to them all, and she promised me cards and cake when she married. She never told me that she was disappointed in this man for whom she had

played so cleverly, so boldly, and with such unfortunate success. She never told me that she was disappointed in him; that the beau ideal of her girlhood was proved a mistake to her now mature judgment. But I knew that she was repenting herself both of her scheme and the success which had attended it, when she gave me her hand in a long, lingering clasp when I bade her "farewell and Godspeed."

I went home to Brandon Lodge sadder, and I fear not wiser, than when I had left it. For a while I tried to interest myself in making improvements on my estate, but the life was flat and tame, and I soon sickened of it. I passed the spring and summer in a sort of moonstruck idleness, and, at last, when winter was coming on again, I felt that if I would keep either mind or body healthy, I must shake off the associations of last Christmas, and prepare to lead a new life. I believed her married long ago, and always called her Lady Holdsworth to myself.

I went back to Italy, and reached Rome just as the English residents commenced their preparations for passing our great national festival incongruously. "Come and dine with me on Christmas Day," an old friend of mine, a sculptor, said to me. "I have two English ladies,—a rich old widow and her companion, —dining with me that day. The widow is to have my Beatrice Cenci, and the companion appreciates it."

I went in blind ignorance, and I met her again! She was not married.

"After all I did you will despise me when I tell you that I was so disappointed in him that I couldn't help breaking it off," she said to me, flashing fiercely in her old way.

I did not despise her. When we leave Rome the rich old lady will have relinquished all claim to Georgie's services, and I shall be obliged to consult my architect friend about the new rooms at Brandon Lodge after all.

THE SQUIRE'S PEW.

IT stood at the upper end of the centre aisle of the church of the village, of which Squire Paishley was king by the right divine of the goodwill and esteem of all his neighbours. When I saw it first I was a very small child, scarcely tall enough to see over the edge of my uncle's pew, even when I stood on tip-toe on the seat to do it. I had been expressly bidden to be "good" generally, and forbidden to "look at the big pew in the corner" particularly, before I was taken, in a small procession of myself and my aunt, to church. Therefore, as soon as the opportunity offered itself, I did look towards the tabooed spot, and, after one crushing pang of remorse for the guilt of disobedience, I enjoyed what I saw with all my powers of appreciation.

The village choir was singing the psalm that they sang when the "anthem is appointed to be said or sung," when my eyes first fell on that pew, and from its darkest corner a voice rang out that filled the whole building with its wondrous melody. Until my eyes got accustomed to the gloom into which they gazed, I could not discover the form from whence the voice came; so the psalm was nearly over before a very pretty, young, bright face was clearly outlined before me.

It was such a very pretty face; it sparkled there in that old dusty, dark pew with such bright, wavy beams of happiness, that, small child as I was, I fell to wondering how any one could look at anything but it in that church I believe that I envied my uncle, because he was midway up, in a high, narrow box, called a reading-desk (the pulpit towered above his head), and could therefore see right down into the Squire's pew. I longed to overthrow all standing rules and regulations, and ask my charming aunt, who always checked my childish sensibilities by looking sad, who the beautiful lady was? Then the psalm was over, and I was taken down, and the service went on, and I saw no more of her until the hymn before the communion service.

My uncle was the rector of the parish,—a grave, quiet, kindly, middle-aged gentleman when I, at nine years old, knew him first. I was his youngest brother's only daughter, and my papa was in India at the time, and my mamma was on her way back to him, after having brought my brother and me home, that we might live and be educated in England.

These were my first holidays, those Christmas days which saw me first staying at the village of Hoverton, and prying at the Squire's pew. My uncle had lately married, and his wife had kindly asked me, the little exile from love and home, to spend my few weeks' respite from lesson-learning with her. She was many years younger than my uncle, and she looked even younger than she was; for she was graceful and girlish in figure and manner, and she had a way of playing about with her horses and dogs with the abandoned gaiety of a child.

But in the house—in the beautiful Elizabethan house, with its many rooms, and its dark, splendid old family furniture, she "grew a stately lady" to a degree that startled me when I first witnessed the transformation. I had seen her riding on the lawn, galloping her horse as hard as he could go, with her hat in her hand, waving on her dogs as they tore along at her side. I

admired my aunt very much as I watched her: she looked to me like a "beautiful picture lady." Her eyes sparkled; her voice rang like a silver bell as she called to "Belle and Beau;" her face glowed. When she pulled up at last, and got off her horse and came up to me as I stood by the ha-ha, and said, "Did you think we had all gone mad, little one?" I believe I wished to cry and kiss her, and tell her I thought she must be like a queen. But I restrained myself, as children do, with a painful effort sometimes, for fear of being laughed at, and told her, "No—not mad—nice, and dear."

She gave me a little pat on the head, and repeated my words after me, not mockingly. I was not a bit wounded by her adaptation of them. "Nice and dear; how long since I have been that to any one," she said. And then we went into the house, and she became a sad and stately little beauty all at once, without a trace upon her of the one who had galloped over the grass, and halloed to Belle and Beau.

I can recall her as she looked this day, after changing her dress when she came in from her ride. It is fifteen years—the time of which I write—and it was not the fashion then to wear the long trains that are in favour now; still, though it was not the fashion, Mrs. Viners wore them, and though it was winter, she wore white; certainly it was merino that she wore, and white was as warm as any colour would have been; but it looked cold on a December day, and it looked peculiar.

She had told me to go into the dining-room when we came in, and to wait for her there. She came in very soon, for she was quick in all she did, and I remember that I started when I saw her all in white, with her dark hair half-curled and pushed far off her face behind her ears. Everything in that room—carpet, curtains, walls, furniture, all were dark save herself. She concentrated all the light, yet it did not seem to brighten her; for her face was pale and sad, and she moved along so slowly, that I reasoned, as a child will reason, from myself, and fancied she must be ill.

"Well, Pet," she said, kindly, "do you think you can amuse yourself here for a week or two?"

"Yes—if you'll let me love you," I replied, as my heart overflowed with that admiring love which women can create in children's hearts. She was sitting with her elbow resting on the arm of a low chair, with her hand supporting her cheek, when I spoke. She smiled and said:—

"You are a dear, affectionate little thing, Pet—I wish I could do more than I can do to amuse you."

I did not like to whisper what was in my heart: "Be always as you were out on the lawn just now." But I got closer to her, and kissed her pretty little hand, and she soon forgot me, and sat thinking for a long time. When my uncle came in from his parish work, he said it was nearly the dinner hour, and asked if I had better not go to bed.

The next day was Sunday; I have already told you how I went to church, and what I saw there. When I came home I began rapturously expatiating on the beauty of the young, fair, merry-eyed face that had glowed out upon me from the darkness of the Squire's pew.

"What does the child mean, Nina?" my uncle asked of his wife, and then she held her face up steadily towards him, and answered,—

"Lady Rawley is staying with the Paishleys; she came yesterday."

My uncle looked tenderly at his wife as he listened, gazed at her with the look of a loving, pitying father.

"Did you see her, Nina dear?" he asked.

"Yes, as I came home from my ride, I met the carriage taking them up from the station; her husband was with her."

Steadily as they both spoke, and child as I was, I felt sure that here, buried beneath those quiet words and looks of theirs, was some painful mystery. And a little feeling of sorrow for her mingled with my love and admiration for Aunt Nina.

I was sent to church with a servant in the afternoon, and again my attention was riveted by the fair face in the corner. Aunt Nina had pleaded a headache as an excuse for staying at home, and when my uncle had sympathised with her about the pain, but urged that going to church would not make it worse, she had answered, almost coldly I thought, "that she did not intend to go—that was enough."

I waited, like a watchful, timid mouse, in our pew until my uncle came out of the vestry, and then I went out to meet him, and he led me out of the church. Just outside the door, a group of ladies and gentlemen were waiting to see him; amongst the group, to my joy I saw my bright beauty, Lady Rawley.

She was beautifully dressed in velvet as blue as her eyes, with rich trimmings of white fur about it. She was standing with her hand on a gentleman's arm when we came out, but she took it away and held out both her hands to my uncle as he came up.

"Mr. Viners," she said, "let me introduce my husband, Sir Victor Rawlely, to you. Victor, this is my very dear old friend."

She spoke out in such ringing, joyous, delighted tones, that I felt hurt that the two gentlemen did not seem more joyous and delighted too. Her husband looked a very fine, haughty, handsome man. I was almost afraid of him as he took off his hat and nearly swept the ground with it, in acknowledgment of my uncle's bow. Then the Squire, Mr. Paishley, and his wife spoke to us. Lady Rawley was their daughter, I learnt afterwards, and while they were all talking I had time to wish Aunt Nina were with us, that I might have tried to make up my mind which of the two—Lady Rawley or Aunt Nina—was the prettiest.

Lady Rawley was very animated, very gay, very restless. She would take her husband's arm for a step or two, and then drop it and take her father's, and then come dancing round to her mother's side, and then hold up her face to my uncle, and ask him if she

looked "a very staid old married woman yet?" And all the time her husband walked along in dignified silence, and did not seem to be much interested in her or in anybody else.

"I have to congratulate you too, Mr. Viners," Lady Rawley said, when we were parting at the Rectory gate; "when I heard you were married I was so startled. I am longing to see her; she will call on me soon, will she not?"

"I have no doubt my wife will do herself the pleasure of making your acquaintance, and renewing her former one with your husband," my uncle said firmly; and when he said that, Lady Rawley did blush a little, and Sir Victor gave a quick glance at my uncle, and then looked colder than before. Then we said good-bye, and parted.

When we got home, we found that Aunt Nina's head was well again. She was sitting reading by the drawing-room fire, and all around her were scattered a lot of magazines and newspapers. "You may stay with me till dinner is ready, Mouse, and tell me all you have seen and heard," she said, when my uncle went away to his study to put away his sermon. So I nestled by her side, and told her of our meeting with Lady Rawley, narrating closely, as children can, each word and look.

She was very quiet: her eyes were covered with her hand, and I thought she was listening very attentively. Presently my uncle came back, and when he found she did not look up, he went and lifted her face up with his hand, and then I saw that the tears were running over her cheeks, and that she was very pale.

"What is this, Nina?" he asked, sadly.

"I shall be obliged to see them, Edward," she sobbed; "there is no peace for me—no rest, even here, where I believed myself buried."

"You will see them as my wife, remember, Nina. You will not let them feel that pity for me which is akin to contempt, will you? You will command yourself,

and show them that I have good reason for the pride I feel in my wife?"

"Why have they left the world, where they both shine so, for this wilderness, where I was quiet at least?"

"You knew it was inevitable that she should come to her father's, when you married me," he said; "bear it for your honour's sake and mine; do not make them and me fear that your heart is wasting in 'this wilderness.'"

He had held her chin in his hand all the time he had been speaking. Now he bent down and kissed her forehead; but she never moved to meet or return his caress.

"I will try to do all you wish," she said, wearily. "I will call on Lady Rawley to-morrow. Don't step on my profane papers, Edward. I won't read them any more now, for I am going to talk to Mouse."

"Do I ever interfere with your reading, dear?" he asked; and she shook her head, and said, "No, he was very good to her;" and then she looked at the papers in a way that seemed to show she had nothing more to say to him.

He turned round and stood, with his back to the fire, watching his young wife's face anxiously for a long time. Aunt Nina was quite unconscious of the watch, and presently her thoughts went wandering off far away from the paper she held in her hand, and she forgot all about us both. So, after a time, he, thinking this I fancy, went away and left us alone.

I kept as quiet as the "mouse" she called me, until she moved and remembered me. Then I took courage out of the intense curiosity I had about it all, and asked her, "if Lady Rawley was not good, that she didn't like to see her?"

"Yes; very good," she said; "much better than I am."

I made manifest my utter disbelief in the assertion that Lady Rawley, or anybody else, could be better than Aunt Nina. She was rapidly becoming the object of my childish idolatry. The feeling I had that she was

not quite happy nearly broke my heart, for I was a precocious child, thoughtful beyond my years, from a habit my mother had of making me her companion.

She did not tell me then, but I knew long after, that my earnest faith in her saved her at this juncture from the blackness of utter despair. She could not bear to wreck that childish faith, by giving way to a regretfulness that would have made all about her miserable. So she struggled with herself, and the better angel conquered. When my uncle came back into the room, she got up and met him with a gentle affection that was very pretty to see: she was such a young beauty, and he seemed to me so much too old for her to love.

"May I take Mouse with me, Edward, when I go and call there to-morrow?" she asked; and when he said, "Just as you please, Nina; everything shall be as you please as far as it can be," she stooped down and kissed me, and told me "to go to bed and dream that I was to see beautiful Lady Rawley the next day." My young mind could not grasp the facts, but I felt they were interesting, and I did long for the next day.

It came at last, it and the hour at which we were to start. Aunt Nina came down then so metamorphosed by her change of dress, that I loved her more than ever for her heightened beauty. She was robed from head to foot in a sheeny, lustrous, golden-brown velvet dress, made with a little loose jacket for driving, and she wore a little bit of a black beaver Spanish hat, with a tiny black feather in it. My uncle met her at the doorway, and she laughed and "stood out" before him, for "him to see that she was all right."

He looked at her, half-smiling, half-sadly, for a minute, and then he shook his head. When he did that all her smiles and brightness vanished, and she grew stately and sad again. "What is it, Edward?" she asked. "Where is the cloven foot showing now?—*this* dress is not too fine, even for a clergyman's wife."

"My darling Nina, that was not my thought," he said. "I only regretted (foolishly) for half an instant, that

you so seldom had incentives to preen yourself at your best."

"But you do not wish me to appear before them at my worst, do you?" she asked, sharply. And then he said, "No, no, my child," and handed her into the carriage, and when he had lifted me up, he got in and sat beside her.

It was an open carriage that we drove in on this bright December day, and she was our charioteer. It was a very short distance to the Hall, and the conversation the whole way turned upon the merits and beauties of the horses she was driving. It seemed that they and the phæton had been a present to her on her marriage, from my uncle, and she kept on telling him what a pleasure they were to her, and how she was sure Lady Rawley herself had not a finer pair.

It was such a pretty picture, that of our all going into the great saloon at the Hall, and every one getting up to meet us, and making us warmly welcome. Aunt Nina grew haughty directly we entered the avenue leading up to the house, and queened it over every one in silent stateliness when we got into the room. But no one seemed offended with her. On the contrary, they made much of her, and I prided myself more than ever about her, thinking what a much greater lady she was than any of them.

She had married my uncle and come down to live at Hoverton after Miss Paishley had been married to Sir Victor Rawley; consequently, they were strangers to each other. But she knew Lady Rawley's husband, for she swept him a low curtsey, and gave him the tips of her fingers to shake, and then turned to his wife and seemed eager to make her acquaintance. So my wish was gratified, and I saw them together, and Aunt Nina to my joy was as great a beauty as blue-eyed Lady Rawley.

Scraps of the topics they talked about come floating back to my mind as I write. There were three windows in the room; from each window there was a

lovely landscape. Accordingly, scenery (that salvation of society in the country) was discussed. Then some one said, that Mrs. Viners must find it dull down here? and Mrs. Viners merely said, "No."

"But after the whirl to which you have been used?" Lady Rawley urged; and then Mrs. Viners said that "Change was pleasant."

"So I find," the brilliant beauty cried. "Mr. Viners, please, don't say that your old pet parishioner is backsliding, when I tell you that my London life seems the only one I could live now; but then, Victor's set is so charming it would spoil any one for any other."

"I differ with you there," Mrs. Viners said, in a clear voice that sounded all over the room. "I mixed largely with that set once, as Sir Victor Rawley has probably told you, and it has not spoilt me for the enjoyment of the life I lead now."

I felt sure there was a dagger concealed in that speech, and I wondered whom it had struck. Lady Rawley was the first to speak. "I suppose you interest yourself very much in parish work, Mrs. Viners," she said.

Aunt Nina shook her head. "My interest is confined to ordering things to be sent when my husband tells me to send them," she said.

"Church decorations, then?" Lady Rawley suggested. "You like doing church-work, I suppose?"

Mrs. Viners shook her head again.

"What *does* interest you then, Mrs. Viners?" the inquisitive beauty asked.

"Myself—and my husband; nothing else at present," Aunt Nina replied, and a look of genuine fun stole over her face as she said it. Soon afterwards the visit came to an end, and we drove home.

There was a good deal of intercourse between the two houses during the following fortnight. The Hall people dined at the Rectory, and my uncle and aunt dined with them; and Lady Rawley and Aunt Nina rode together one day. But through it all, Aunt Nina had a hard fight to seem always quiet and composed,

and contented. She always succeeded in being these things before the Rawleys; but the success was bought at the cost of a good deal of pain and struggling. But she was always sweet and kind to me, no matter how much her head ached; and when I went back to school I was quite ready to have laid down my life for Aunt Nina, provided the sacrifice of it would have availed her anything.

Circumstances prevented my seeing more of Hoverton Rectory and its inhabitants for many years. Other relations claimed me, and when I paid my second visit to Aunt Nina I was a grown-up young lady of eighteen, and she I learnt was thirty.

I was staggered to see her so little altered from my remembrance of her. I was also staggered to find that my uncle could not have been the very old gentleman he had seemed to me nine years ago, since he scarcely seemed beyond middle age now. But Aunt Nina was the greatest marvel. She was just as graceful, just as pretty, just as fascinating as ever. The only difference I found in her was that she looked a shade fatter, and many shades happier than formerly.

The morning after my arrival I was taken down to see the alterations in the church. Progress had been busy in it. The lumbering old galleries, that had blocked up its beautiful painted windows, were taken down. So were the high square pews that had looked like sheep-pens, and light oaken movable seats reigned in their stead. The high box, that had been reading-desk and pulpit too, had disappeared; a brass eagle lectern spread its wings, and a black oak pulpit stood at the northern junction of the chancel with the aisle.

Everything was changed. There was an altar now where formerly a plain table, covered with a common red cloth, had stood;—an altar, where the beauty of holiness was brought prominently forward, and where it was well shown that a refined taste was not incompatible with a religious one.

"Where does the Squire sit now, Aunt Nina?" I

asked. "I remember his pew well; and pretty Lady Rawley?"

"Do you remember her?" Aunt Nina said, and a very faint blush crept over her cheek. "Why, you were such a mite of a child, that I should have thought you would have forgotten all about her; what, do you remember going to the Hall?"

"Yes, and all about the visit; and what you said, and what she said; and how you all looked, and how handsome and haughty her husband was. I didn't like him; did you, Aunt Nina?"

Aunt Nina darted one quick, questioning glance towards my uncle, and her face grew scarlet.

"I am not quite sure that I did like him then, Helen," she said, slowly; "but Sir Victor Rawley and I had been friends in days of yore; it is difficult to speak of a friend, when the friendship 'is fled?"

"Has your friendship for him fled?" I asked, thoughtlessly enough; and then my uncle pointed out some other new features in the church, in a way that convinced me he desired to give Aunt Nina an opportunity of recovering herself.

It was human nature, I suppose; at any rate I could not help speculating a good deal about the connection between Lady Rawley and Aunt Nina. Through a long series of years, I had thought nothing at all about it; in fact, I had nearly forgotten it. But now that I was once more in the presence of one of the actresses in the little drama that had made the greatest impression upon me on the stage of life, I recalled it all vividly enough, and longed to have it explained.

That evening (it was in the hot long summer days that my second visit to Hoverton Rectory was paid), while I was dressing for dinner, in the pale light of declining day, Aunt Nina came into my room.

"The Rawleys are here again, Helen," she began, seating herself by the side of my table; "it is fated that you are to witness every meeting of mine with my beautiful rival."

"Your rival?" I said, in perplexity.

"Yes," she said, laughing a little nervously. "My successful rival, too. You say you remember every look, and word, and tone that passed between us; recall them now when I tell you that she took away my lover from me. I was engaged to be married to Sir Victor Rawley when the beautiful Miss Paishley came out, saw, and conquered him at the first meeting."

"Aunt Nina!" I exclaimed.

"Then I got over my love for him," she said, in a low voice. "I did that, Helen, really and truly, or I would not have married your uncle; but when I did marry, I kept on remembering that my fate was less bright than hers. And I hated her; and now she is here with her children, and I—"

She paused, and I mentally finished her sentence—"I have none." All I said aloud was, "Dear Aunt Nina; and you never ought to have had anything to grieve you."

"I have nothing really to grieve me," she replied. "Mine has been a very peaceful married life, so quiet and undisturbed that I have often been in danger of forgetting that there is a world outside Hoverton."

"Have you seen her this time? have you seen her children?"

"Not yet; that pleasure is to come. You shall see me enjoy it, Helen. You shall hear me tell Victor Rawley how beautiful I think his children,—for they are beautiful, I hear."

I ventured to ask a dangerous question.

"Would you care less about telling him that, Aunt Nina, if you had children of your own?"

"Maybe I shouldn't care about telling him anything at all then," she said, sadly; "or, more probably still, I should feel pleasure in praising his children if I had any of my own to love. It's her looks that I dread; she will be so very triumphant—she has been more fortunate than I, in every way."

"No, Aunt Nina," I pleaded, "you have had a happy, peaceful life here. You say that you have had that, and you have been loved by your husband; there must be some compensation in that, isn't there?"

"Yes," she replied; "but I have always a feeling that I have been worsted by her, and that she knows it, when I meet Lady Rawley."

Then I asked Aunt Nina to tell me as much as she cared to tell of her former life and relations with Sir Victor Rawley, before she had settled down in quiet Hoverton Rectory.

She had been brought up by her grandmother, it appeared, a rich old lady who had been proud of Nina's grace and beauty, and who ordained that Nina should make a good match. The old lady had been very generous to her grandchild. Nina was well brought out, introduced under flawless auspices, and generally put in the way of being seen to the best advantage. It was not at all surprising that after an uninterrupted run of successes, during a whole season, she should at the end of it have been asked in marriage by one of the most eligible men of her year, Sir Victor Rawley, a baronet with a fine property, for whom many a mother and daughter had angled in vain.

The engagement had been announced at once in the columns of the *Morning Post*, after that injudicious fashion of the day, which disregards the old adage about "many a slip between the cup and the lip." All the friends of both families offered congratulations freely; the *trousseau* was ordered, the wedding-day fixed. The bride elect was in a blaze of honour, and glory and happiness; and the bridegroom elect was causing every one to speak of his passionate devotion to the lady of his choice, when a blow fell. The beautiful Miss Paishley appeared at a party at which Sir Victor Rawley was present without his betrothed. He was struck by her, dazzled by her. Both she and her parents had been living too much out of the world to have heard details of his engagement to Aunt Nina.

He soon spoke of it as "an entanglement from which he was anxious to free himself." When he did free himself, which was very soon, they offered no opposition to his marriage with their daughter. Nina, from being at the summit of success, and love and happiness, found herself (still in her bloom) deserted, pitied, jilted! The life she was leading, the ceaseless round of gaieties, the endless parties, the interminable scheming for amusement, palled upon her. A craving for rest and peace set in, and she found none in the world that knew of the bright hopes that had been blasted. By some chance or other she met my uncle, fascinated him, and was fascinated herself by the fact of his knowing all about, and living close to, Victor Rawley's wife's people. So when he asked her she married him. And still the memory of the slight that had been offered to her love and pride in old days rankled.

That was all her story, and she told it very prettily; half laughing as she confessed that her feelings for her old lover were of the frankest, kindest sort; but that "it was the woman who had eclipsed her whom she could not forgive."

"You shall see how she will plant her children before me, Helen," she said; "and I shall have to admire them. Old Mrs. Paishley says they're lovely."

"That may be grandmaternal vanity only," I suggested, "but even if they are lovely, what then?"

She laughed, and confessed it would not be a great trial to her, "even if they were lovely." Still I saw she dreaded the meeting, and so I looked forward with keen interest to it.

That meeting did not take place till after the Sunday; therefore, before we spoke, I once more had an opportunity of silently and unobservedly noticing Lady Rawley in the Squire's pew, for it still retained that appellation, although it was altered in form. The years which had passed over her head, since I first fell down in childish worship of her loveliness, had changed her much. She was a beautiful woman still, but it was

beauty of such a different type to that which had formerly distinguished her. She was large, fair, fat and florid; a buxom matron, looking, as she led her little daughters by the hand out of the church, at least ten or a dozen years older than Aunt Nina.

The latter and I had a quiet little talk again that evening about the contrast between the fate which had been hers, and the fate which had nearly been hers. "When I came here first," she told me, "though I was never actually cold or unkind to your uncle, I was indolently and insolently averse to taking the smallest interest in anything connected with his parish-work or professional career. He did not exactly ask me to do anything, for the fear he had of coercing me, and I never offered, and so it went on deepening, and I knew that people complained a good deal of my conduct as a rector's wife."

"But what eventually made you take a more lively interest in this life you were leading?" I asked.

"Oh! I think it was the conviction that would make itself felt in time, that the life I had led, though pleasant enough while it lasted, had been a poor insufficient thing; then just as this conviction was making itself felt strongly, my interest was awakened a good deal by finding out that what I had hitherto looked upon as idle forms and ceremonies in church-worship, had a real, true meaning; my husband was engaged in earnestly and quietly striving to render the services and the building in which they took place less cold and unattractive. As the necessity of the beauty he was seeking to infuse into them grew upon me, I could not stand apart in careless indifference as to how that meaning was manifested. You know, Helen," she continued, in an explanatory tone, "it is impossible, unless one has a very bad nature indeed, to go on for any great length of time, clinging to what is proved frail and false, as my old life was shown to me, and standing away from what is healthy and living and trustworthy. I have been very happy, and I do not think your uncle is unhappy."

"Indeed, I don't think so either; does he know about Sir Victor Rawley?"

"Yes; I told him before my marriage: I often wonder what and how much Victor told her."

"Perhaps nothing."

"Oh, he must! she looks so triumphant."

"Aunt Nina, that would be too unladylike, to say nothing of its being worse on her part."

Aunt Nina laughed, and shook her head. "Not in her—she does not do it in an unladylike manner; even when I did not like my rival, I could not accuse her of want of breeding; now I should like her very much if she would not look triumphant about her children."

A few days after this, I once more went up to the Hall with Aunt Nina to call on Lady Rawley. The Rector's pretty wife no longer made a cold, stately, unsympathetic progress through the village that owned her husband's spiritual sway. She had that wonderful knack of seeming to know and seeming to like people, which wins so unfailingly. "It was not like this, was it Helen, when you were here last?" she said; "then, I honestly own, everybody bored me, and I fancy now that I bored everybody; I thought I could live my life without the smallest aid from without, and I proved I could not; there were times when I could not suffice to myself, times when I would have given anything not to have seen that my husband thought I feigned an interest in what interested him, as he did think long after all feigning was over with me: there's Lady Rawley on the lawn, with her children—what a group!"

She spoke admiringly, and it was a group worthy of admiration. The bonnie beauty of the mother looked quite in keeping in the midst of that bright bevy of children. The old rivals met a minute after, and Lady Rawley called her visitors' particular attention to the eldest boy, Victor, who was the image of his father, every one declared, and who, her ladyship avowed, was her special idol.

"I suppose they are all special idols?" Aunt Nina

said, when we went into the house, leaving the children on the lawn; and old Mrs. Paishley shook her head a little, and looked almost reproachfully at her daughter, as the latter answered:

"No, indeed; Victor is my boy—my first, my darling! I can't understand any one caring for any but the first."

"Does your husband hold the same views?" Aunt Nina asked.

"No, fortunately for the rest, he does not; though he is obliged to admit that Victor is the boy of boys—how lucky you are not to have any, Mrs. Viners," and Lady Rawley looked as if she thought Aunt Nina very much to be pitied as she said it.

"I don't think myself lucky in that respect at all," Aunt Nina said, frankly, and Lady Rawley shrugged her shoulders, and said:

"Well, there was no accounting for taste, but just in that respect she did think Mrs. Viners fortunate. Certainly not for having all these years been condemned to live in this stagnant Hoverton."

Idle words uttered in jest—uttered in malice, uttered in thoughtlessness—do an immense deal of harm. I could see then at once, and afterwards more clearly, when we were driving home alone, that Aunt Nina was thinking a great deal about that little speech of Lady Rawley's, relative to the pitiableness of her (Aunt Nina's) position at Hoverton. Now this was the more surprising to me, as Lady Rawley stood convicted, in my judgment, of being a very flippant and superficial person. I felt sure that no opinion of hers would have weighed with me. Yet here was Aunt Nina, who had her own reasons for thinking even less of Lady Rawley than I thought, actually suffering herself to be thrown out of gear by a chance shot from the very little fashionable gun of her rival.

I was so sure that Aunt Nina was feeling mortified, or sore, or something akin to one of these sensations, that I was in nowise astonished when she broke a long silence.

"Do you see, Helen, how impossible it is for Lady Rawley to abstain from pointing the difference between our respective fates," she said, with rather a hard little laugh; a laugh that grated on my ears more harsh than any sound I had ever heard from Aunt Nina's lips.

"Hers has been so very bright, and mine has been so very—"

She paused, and I asked:

"So very what?"

"Sweet," she said, with a sigh.

"Is it painful to look back upon?" I asked.

"No," she said quickly, shaking her head, "very far from that; pleasant enough to look back upon. But what should I have thought if I had looked forward to it ten years ago? I wouldn't have undertaken it, that's certain; and I should have gone into fresh unhappiness in search of excitement; so what a happy thing it is that we can't foresee."

By-and-by her mind seemed to take another turn.

"After all it is stagnation and torpor," she said, just after nodding to some acquaintances in the village; "these good people seem to think that I only commenced when I came here; that before that I had no being, and that Hoverton bounds my experience of and interest in life. O! the local mind, the local mind, Helen! never put yourself in the way of being judged by it."

"You know you don't care for its judgment," I said; and I could not help laughing at the seriousness of her affected caution.

"No, I don't mind it; and yet I have had to mind it because it encompassed me on every side. Lady Rawley would soon hear herself denounced as an unnatural mother, and be suspected of every crime in the calendar, if she aired her views, respecting her indifference to all but her eldest child, in the country."

"Heartless peacock!" I could not help saying; "how can you consider her, and what judgment might be formed of her, Aunt Nina?"

"Shall I tell you why I can't help considering her, Helen?" she asked earnestly. "I will. It is because she shines me down in every way; she has always won; and still, to tell the truth, I can't feel as if I had lost much."

From which confession I gathered that Aunt Nina had a little feminine vanity and weakness in the composition of her really fine character, and that at times my uncle must have had a difficult part to play in managing those little gusts of variableness which scarcely amounted to temper.

But her vanity was so very frank and honest. For instance, she said to me once:

"I never had the satisfaction some women have who are slighted and left, namely, that the one who left me repented his choice; I believe the Rawleys to be intensely happy and fond of each other."

"And you wouldn't wish them otherwise, would you?" I said.

"No, certainly not now; but that first time they came here, I didn't at all like her for being so nice; now the only thing I do not quite like about her is that she is doing all she can, out of excessive love for him, to spoil that eldest boy; and he is so like his father that I do regret that."

It was not an unamiable regret, and it dwelt upon her mind for some time. The fruit of the culture and consideration she bestowed upon it was that my uncle grew interested in the subject. So much interested that he had long conversations with both Sir Victor and Lady Rawley about their pride and hope, whose disposition was untainted by indulgence as yet. The end of it all was that Sir Victor, whose adoration for his son was only one degree less than his adoration for his wife, came to Aunt Nina and asked her, for the sake of their old regard, to intercede with her husband and get him to take Victor as a private pupil until such time as he should be old enough for Oxford.

So it has come about that the old link which love

formed and broke is reunited by friendship. Victor lives at the Hoverton Rectory; so, naturally, his father and mother stay pretty frequently at Hoverton Hall. All the bitterness of rivalry, and envy and contempt for each other's positions is over between the two women. For Lady Rawley's life is no more regarded as one unchequered triumph now by Aunt Nina, than hers is regarded as a stagnant pool by Lady Rawley.

SPOKEN IN IDLENESS.

'IT is of very little consequence where he met her, or how he met her, he has married her! that is the point that concerns us most painfully," Mrs. Armitage said, with a sad severity, when she first heard of her brother's marriage. But Ethel, her daughter, felt a great curiosity on the subject, and so when her mamma dropped the letter that contained the tidings, Ethel picked it up hastily, and asked:

"Very likely uncle tells you where, and how, and when, and all about it, mamma, if you will only have patience to read on and see—or may I?"

Mrs. Armitage waved her handkerchief and hand, which she had the moment before pressed to her eyes, assentingly, and Ethel read on to the end of the letter without delay.

"What can have induced him at his age to be such a fool?" Mrs. Armitage said, angrily; and Ethel without looking up, replied:

"What? oh! he tells you 'what' here; uncle says, 'he thought their marriage would make her happier, and he knew it would make him so.' Bravo, old gentleman! what a capital reason."

"Pray do not be so flippant," Mrs. Armitage sighed;

"no one knows the difference it may make to us—it's the breaking up of our home, I see that."

Ethel blushed, and looked up now. "Mamma," she said, gently, "we only came on a visit, and we have been here ten years; we can't complain of having to turn out now."

"But I am not sure that we shall have to turn out, and I shall feel that I have every right to feel it if we do," Mrs. Armitage exclaimed, energetically. Then she got up and rang the bell, and when the old servant, who had been butler, footman, and valet, for the last thirty years to Mr. Lee, came in, she said:

"I have had news that has upset me very much, Warner—your master is married!"

The news had such an effect on Warner that he nearly upset the breakfast service; still he was able to say he was glad, and to ask "who the lady was?"

In answer to this Mrs. Armitage shook her head, and looked a look that was published by Warner, and remembered in the village long after it had escaped the memory of its author. "Ah! that I cannot tell you, Warner; I only know that she was a Miss Chester, and that she is Mrs. Lee; say as little about it as possible."

"Mamma, how could you say that?" Ethel asked, reproachfully, as soon as they were alone.

"I am acting for the best," the lady said, grimly.

"No, mamma, you are making things look strange when you needn't. Tell people out and out that Uncle James is married; 'saying little about it' won't unmarry him again, and why should it?"

"I really cannot answer frivolous questions," Mrs. Armitage said, testily. "I have many things to think about; we may not have a roof over our heads long."

"That will be our own fault then," Ethel said, defiantly; "we can afford to have one." And then Miss Armitage deemed it discreet to go out for her morning's ride, and to leave her mother to chew the cud of mournful meditation alone.

A young, careless-natured girl, well endowed by nature with good looks, and feeling tolerably certain that fortune had very good things in store for her, Ethel Armitage could very well afford to be tolerant to the change which her uncle's marriage would make in their manner of life. True, his house had been like a father's house to her for the last ten years. But there was no grievance to her in the thought that this state of things must come to an end now, for, as she said, her mother "could afford a roof of her own;" and, as for herself, her cousin Frank the young Squire up at the Hall, had asked her to be the mistress of it—so no wrong was done to Ethel by the Rector of Everton bringing home a wife.

The Lees of Everton were a flourishing, well-rooted stock. There was always a son to spare to the Church, a good thing for the family since Everton was a family living. It had been given to James Lee by his brother, the "old Squire," as he was called by the present generation. And it had been held by James Lee for thirty years, with satisfaction to himself and his parishioners, with the exception of certain of these latter who had wanted to marry him.

Ten years before the opening of this story their only sister, Mrs. Armitage, had come back to Everton a widow with one daughter. She had come back for several reasons, amongst which affection for the soil and the scenes of her youth was the least potent. Like a sensible woman she argued that it would be a very good thing indeed if her eldest brother's eldest son, the heir, should fall in love with and marry her pretty Ethel in years to come. Likewise she thought that, waiting the arrival of those years, it would be a very good arrangement for her to live at the rectory with her bachelor brother James, and so save house-rent.

During these ten years all things had gone precisely as she desired. The old Squire died; Frank, his son, reigned in his stead, and asked Ethel to reign with him. And Mr. Lee, the rector, thought no arrangement could

have been so perfect as that which devolved the management of his liberal establishment upon his sister.

But now apparently he thought so no longer, for he had taken to himself a wife without beat of drum—a stranger in the land—one over whom Mrs. Armitage could not hope to have any manner of authority. It was easy enough for Ethel, who was going to a grander home of her own, to bear this blow gallantly; but Mrs. Armitage made room in her heart for the hardest thoughts of her new sister-in-law, as she thought of the carriage and other comforts which that sister-in-law's advent would wrest from her.

Still, for all her annoyance, she could not resist the dear delight of uttering many words about the matter. In the course of the walk she took through the village that day, she contrived to make known to a great many people the great fact of her brother's marriage. Before nightfall, the knowledge that the Rector had married a young lady, quite a stranger to him, of whom his family knew actually nothing, was pretty widely diffused.

"I suppose you hardly know what to hope, Miss Armitage?" an elderly maiden lady who had at one time made herself a district visitor towards the subjugation of the Reverend James, said with a sort of satirical grimness that was infinitely aggravating to Ethel.

"Yes, I do know what to hope," that young lady replied; "I hope she'll be young and a pleasant companion for me." And this Miss Ethel said in a tone that implied that she had not too many pleasant lady companions in Everton.

Miss Armitage made a very pretty picture as she sat upon her horse outside the garden-gate of the cottage in which Miss Anstruther lived, and talked over the topmost bar to that lady. Her Saxon name was well borne out by her Saxon beauty. She was a fair-skinned, fair-haired, blue-eyed girl, with a broad brow and a resolute nose and mouth, and a figure that was beautifully developed by health, and those best of all

gymnastics, plenty of horse and walking exercise. She made a very pretty picture—there was something very winning about her; moreover, she was going to be mistress of and dispenser of hospitalities up at the Hall, so Miss Anstruther did not care to differ with her. The elder lady, therefore, only said in reply:

"To be sure—very nice for you, and I'm sure it's high time that your uncle should settle in life; he's not so young as he was," and she smiled.

"No," Ethel said carelessly, "we none of us are. I was ten when I came here, and I feel rather more than that now, don't you?"

"You can only sincerely hope that, hasty as his decision has been, it may prove a wise one," Miss Anstruther said solemnly, evading giving any answer to Ethel's last remark. And then Ethel said "goodbye," and rode home refreshed by her ride to the extent of being able to support a repetition of her mother's doubts and fears on the subject.

"Mamma," she began, when they were alone in the evening, "don't you think we ought to take some steps about giving treats to the school-children and the choir, or will you leave that till Uncle James comes home?"

"I shall have nothing to say about it," Mrs. Armitage replied.

"Then I'll ask Frank," Ethel said quickly; "he is coming here to-night, and after all, as he is the Squire, it will be the greater compliment if he organises everything."

"Please, Ethel, do not try to make your cousin put himself in a ridiculous position; we may all have bitter cause to rue this marriage; I never knew a case yet of a young woman marrying an old man turn out well; if she is flighty and frivolous, and anxious to join in all the amusements of the neighbourhood——"

"They're not too numerous," Ethel interrupted. But her mother went on unheeding:

"Your uncle will lead a pretty life, and some people will not scruple to say that it serves him right."

"Poor dear Uncle James!" Ethel said, heartily. "I won't look forward to his being punished in such a way when no one can deserve punishment less; at any rate, let us wait to see her before we pronounce her flighty and frivolous; time will show what she is like."

Then Mr. Lee, the Frank of whom mention has been made, came in, and heard the great news, and laughed good-temperedly at the idea of his uncle having stolen a march on him in the matter of marriage. "Dear old fellow! when is he coming back?" he asked, and he was told in three weeks.

The three weeks soon passed, and then the happy pair came home in the light of a glorious August evening. The young Squire and Ethel had taken care that all fitting show of rejoicing should be made. As the Rector and his bride drove from the station to the rectory, the bells pealed most joyously, and all the parish seemed to have turned out to welcome the lady, and see what she was like.

It was quite a young face that which was turned quickly from one side to the other, as they drove along. A young, pretty, but most observant face. And it was a young graceful figure that sprang to the ground without help the moment the waggonette stopped at the door, and a young clear voice that said:

"How delicious to be home at last, after all the knocking about we have had."

"Yes, she talked of 'knocking about,' and before strangers, too," Miss Anstruther told a friend that evening. "I had it from the best authority; talks slang! Well, he has waited for something, I must say!"

"My new home and my new niece!" Mrs. Lee exclaimed, as she entered the hall, and Ethel came to meet her; "how delightful they both are!"

She was perfectly composed and self-possessed, and very, very quiet. There was something that was infinitely prepossessing in her appearance and manners; there was refinement, intelligence, grace, and dignity—all, indeed, that is most charming in woman.

Additionally she was very pretty, too. Her eyes were large, dark, and luminous, and their beauty was enhanced by the thick, long fringe of lashes that fell over them. Her fair, straight-featured little face varied in expression with every change of thought—and these were many. Though her figure was slight and supple, and full of yielding, graceful lines and curves, she walked erectly, with her head proudly poised in a way that marked her well-bred. On this August evening, too, she was dressed with such an exquisitely fitting regard to time, and circumstances, and situation. Ethel had been, all her grown-up life, at the mercy of the first dressmaker and milliner resident in the county town of the shire in which Everton was situated. This arbiter of fashions was a star of magnitude compared to the lesser luminaries; still, she was resident in the county town, and she did not get the latest cut, and shape, and length, and colour, and gore. Ethel felt certain that she was behind the time, as she looked at her new aunt's dress. How far behind she could not say, but it was perceptible that Mrs. Lee's garments were, so to say, in advance of hers (Ethel's).

There was no discomposing embarrassment to combat in the bride. She made herself at home in the easiest manner in the shortest space of time—not at all as though she were impatient to rule, but as if it were only right and proper and becoming that she should do so with as little delay as possible. Accordingly, though there was no unseemly haste to usurp authority manifested, a complete re-organisation of the arrangements which had been too long standing took place in the house. She transposed old furniture, and introduced new, and put painters and paperers to work before she had been at home a week. She had brackets put up in gloomy corners, and white statuettes, or majolica pots holding brilliantly-coloured flowers placed upon them. She brought life and fresh air into the house in a way that enchanted Ethel, who soon looked upon the Rector's young wife as a great authority in all matters

where taste and cultivation were concerned. She won everybody's heart in the neighbourhood, though she would neither play the harmonium, nor teach in the Sunday-school, nor visit the poor. Above all, she evidently made her husband supremely happy, despite that disparity of age from which so much evil had been augured.

She talked freely about herself. Told how she had been educated abroad, at Paris for many years, and later, when she was grown up, in a little German town where she had resided with some English relatives. "Those had been the happy days," she told Ethel, "the sunny, happy days of her life—with the exception of one little cloud which" (with a gay shrug of the shoulders)—"it wasn't worth while to talk about it. She was younger then, and better looking." (This statement Ethel objected to strenuously.) "Yes, yes, much better-looking; and she was English, and, somehow, was always made a great deal of at the balls. Those balls! She had never been to anything like them in England. There was always a regiment quartered in the town—and—they had been happy days!"

Mrs. Armitage, actuated thereunto by the representations of her daughter principally, had moved down into a smaller house in the village. But the two young women, having very little else to occupy their time, spent the greater part of it in each other's society. Even Mrs. Armitage came to feel it as a truth that it was the greatest advantage which had yet fallen to Ethel's lot, this unfettered, familiar, constant intercourse with one of her own sex, who was well endowed with accomplishments and knowledge, and with the power of imparting these pleasantly, as she did to Ethel. Miss Armitage felt a hitherto unknown interest in all her old pursuits, which she had first been taught to pursue under the best, *i.e.*, the most expensive local instructors, when she recommenced them under the auspices of her aunt. Mrs. Lee played brilliantly, and sang, with no great power of voice, perhaps, but with a

taste and management that made it a divine treat to hear her. Her linguistical powers were great also. German, French, and Italian were to her as her mother-tongue, and as she was untiring in her endeavours to make Ethel feel that the tongue is a flexible organ, and can be taught to turn itself tunefully to any articulate sound, and that some of the printed mysteries of German literature were well worth unravelling, Miss Armitage, in time, came to adventure upon the speaking of French and the reading of German with an assurance that was most comforting to herself. To say nothing of its being comforting to the young Squire, who contemplated taking her to Paris on their wedding tour, and who did not wish to be reduced to the ignominious necessity of evading every spot where "English was not spoken."

It ought to have been mentioned before, that the hasty nature of her marriage arrangements was a subject that Mrs. Lee did not shun by any means. With the utmost frankness she told every one who cared to hear about it how she had met Mr. Lee, and why she had married him. She had seen him at a luncheon given by a nephew of his—a younger brother of the Squire's—in the Temple. How came she to be there? Oh! she was invited with the Dalmaines—some people Arthur too knew very well—old friends of hers, or at least old acquaintances; for, years ago, before the happy German town days, she had been at the Paris *pension* with Ada Dalmaine. Well, it was at Arthur Lee's, in the company of these old friends, that she had met Mr. Lee, and he seemed to be interested in her at once, and sorry to hear that she was going away to Germany again soon, as a teacher in a school this time. So, as he showed himself interested in her, she did not mind showing him how utterly miserable such a prospect made her; and then he offered her marriage as an alternative, and she accepted it, and "hoped he would never, never, never have the slightest cause to regret his generous precipitation." So she said, looking up at

his niece with tears in her lovely eyes as she said it, and his niece's firm belief and assertion was that "it would be impossible for Uncle James, or any one else, not to think how wonderfully lucky he had been."

All through the autumn and winter succeeding her marriage, Mrs. Lee was an immense success in the neighbourhood. She proved herself to be neither flighty nor frivolous, but a remarkably charming, intellectual, agreeable woman, and as such a great acquisition at the social gatherings in and around Everton. Her house was well ordered, her conduct as a young matron irreproachable, even in the eyes of many who would willingly have seen it a shade less so, for the sake of bearing out the adage as to May and December. She never gave any one an opportunity of thinking that her mind was dwelling with regret upon bygone days and dead gaieties. She was, as she looked, supremely happy, and Mr. Lee was well justified in believing that he had made a wise choice in his maturity. They had been married nearly a year, when the birth of a son made them happier than they had been before even—a son who was christened Frederick, in order to gratify a whim of his mother's, who always insisted on her boy being called Fritz. "It's so much prettier than the English Frederick," she pleaded, when it was observed to her by Mrs. Armitage that there was a slight want of purpose in the name, "as it was not in the family;" Mrs. Armitage being one of those excellent people, who think it a proof of family affection to perpetuate in their children the least euphonious names the tongue can utter, provided they have been borne by their forefathers or cousins. "Fritz Lee! it sounds outlandish!" Mrs. Armitage said. I could have wished —but there, it's no use saying."

"Yes, do say," Mrs. Lee pleaded politely; "it can't be helped now, you see, because I have taught every one to call him Fritz, and I believe he knows his name already" (he was three weeks old at the time!), "but do tell me what you could have wished."

"Why, that he had been called James."

"Oh! James would have been corrupted into Jim, or Jimmy, to distinguish him from his father," Mrs. Lee said, shaking her head.

"Well, I shall never like it, and never know how to spell it; and as for writing it, I never can write a 'z' so that any one can read it: English names have always been good enough for the Lees before this."

However, in spite of this disapproval of his name on the part of Mrs. Armitage, the Rector's little son was known to every one as "Fritz," and his mother, in consequence, came to be regarded as "more foreign-looking" than ever in the uneducated mind—which was very much divided at this time between distrust of Mrs. Lee's French nurse and wild interest in the preparations for the young Squire's approaching wedding.

For Ethel Armitage was to be married very shortly, and in these latter days she relied more than ever on her aunt. Mrs. Lee was invaluable to the girl as regards all those arrangements which it is the lady's part to make before the great change. Ethel's dresses, the number of bridesmaids, the paper for Ethel's morning room, and the colour of the drawing-room furniture, what the guests were to do after the happy pair left—all these things were left to the choice and direction of Mrs. Lee, whose administrative genius was quite equal to the occasion. It was finally her proposition that Ethel should be married from her uncle's house, a proposition to which every one agreed without demur.

About a fortnight before the wedding, the regiment——a crack corps—quartered in the county town, gave a ball in return for the hospitalities which had been lavished on them. At first, when she received the invitation, the Rector's wife was indifferent about going; but gradually, as she heard speculations and brilliant anticipations about it on all sides, this indifference vanished, and she did begin to wish that her husband did not set his face quite so decidedly against all public balls and amusements in the vicinity of his own parish. Only to go once,

this once, and see Ethel in her glory as Miss Armitage for the last time; she really never would bother him to let her go to a military or any other public ball again, if he would sacrifice his prejudices for once and take her.

She was a very winning woman, and her wishes were strongly set on carrying her point. Need it be said that she won. Sadly against his own intense conviction of what it would be wise and well to do, Mr. Lee agreed to let his wife chaperone Ethel to this ball, and to go with them himself.

The evening came, and she was a most radiantly lovely, happy-looking woman, who bent over little Fritz's cradle to say good-bye to him. She was excited into a state of deeper fascination than ever by this thought of mingling again in a scene that would be so like those that had once been familiar to her. "Really I ought to feel more like an old woman with that before me, she said apologetically, pointing to the cradle; this night shall be my farewell to dancing: James, I will show you that I know how to grow old gracefully."

"I am glad that I shall never see you grow old, my darling," he said, proudly, as he led her down to the carriage; and the remark startled her, and made her look up affrightedly, and realise that he was, in sad truth, too much her senior for her to dare hope that she might pass her life with him.

He was about fifty-five or six, looking young for his age, certainly; but fifty-five or six in spite of his looks. His had been a quiet, good, useful life, and he carried the certificates of its having been so in his face and bearing. A frank-eyed, fresh-coloured old gentleman, with a juvenile power of feeling things acutely and being readily impressed, as was evidenced in his marriage. It had been a characteristic of his from his boyhood, that impressionableness. He had been one all his life who would have suffered from slights as women suffer, who felt kindnesses with an intensity of feeling that never quite matured. He had

been known to keep aloof from people for months, even for years, if he could do them no good, when they had fallen under any cloud that might have made them, as he fancied, less glad to see him than formerly. In fact, he was most tenderly sensitive for the feelings of those on whom the breath of scandal had blown ever so lightly, and though this susceptibility might render him a less strong character than it is well one filling the position he held should have, it greatly endeared him to many who cared more for sympathy than strength.

This was the nature of the man who went to a public ball for the first time in his life, at the bidding and for the pleasure of his beautiful young wife.

It is not necessary, for the furtherance of my story, that I should place a panorama of that ball-room and its occupants before the reader. It was very much like other ball-rooms at great hotels in county towns, and it was filled with very much the same sort of people one sees under similar circumstances elsewhere. Suffice it to say, that among the guests was one, a young civil engineer, who turned to one of the officers of the ——th the instant the Lee party entered the room, asking eagerly,—

"Who is that lady, do you know?"

"That is Miss Armitage, going to marry the young fellow by her side; he's rather a swell down here—the Squire of Everton."

"Her name is not Armitage?" the stranger said, half laughing.

"Yes, it is," the other replied; "I often meet her at her uncle's house; the lady in front on the old fellow's arm is his wife, and she's worth a dozen of Miss Armitage, or any other Miss in the county that I have seen."

"It's the lady in front whom I asked you about," the stranger said, quickly. "I used to know her in Dusseldorf."

"Then I advise you to renew your acquaintance

with her as soon as possible," his friend said, at which suggestion the civil engineer only shrugged his shoulders and answered :

"She was very much blown upon then—under a most awful cloud, in fact; she may not care to be recognised, now she's married, by any one who knew her then." When he had said that, the young man walked away to confide the same particulars to another friend he had in the regiment, and then to another, and so the thing grew.

Grew—until it attained such proportions that it forced itself upon Frank Lee's ears and understanding before the evening was half over. He heard half allusions to it, caught murmurs respecting it, knew that it was suddenly dropped as he approached on all sides, for Mrs. Lee was a popular favourite and a prominent beauty. In his dread that his uncle should hear it then, with the eyes of the world upon him, the young man was imprudent enough to confide it to his own betrothed, who indignantly repudiated the bare idea of so much as a breath ever having been raised about Mrs. Lee. "I will go to her at once, Frank, and ask her if she recognises this man who says he knew her, and tell her what he says." It was in vain Frank entreated Ethel not to do so; all he could wrest from Ethel was a promise that she would not tell Mrs. Lee what the stranger had uttered respecting her until they reached home.

He was pointed out to Mrs. Lee, not as a man who claimed to have known her of old, but as a man who had been engaged in superintending mining operations in Prussia, and who spoke German fluently. And Mrs. Lee put up her glass and looked at him with the blank gaze of unrecognition. In a cowardly way the man seized upon this as "a proof that he had been right in assuming that she did not wish any back numbers from her life to be read," and then laughed about "little Kate Chester" in a way that made some other men long to wring his neck.

However, the story grew, gained monstrous proportions, finally reached Mr. Lee's ears, and broke his heart. And then, when all the world seemed ready to turn against her, when her husband's relations said "little Fritz ought to be taken from her and put under proper guardianship," then she stood at bay and defied all the inhabitants of Dusseldorf combined to say that she had been more than maligned. She had been the object of jealousy, the object of the basest falsehoods, the object of fierce female rancour, envy, and evil-speaking, but she had never been the object of a bad man's guilty love, or a good woman's scorn. And the man who blighted her life when it was promising to be so fair, who crushed her husband's heart with shame, who made her an alien to her child's father's kin, and robbed her of a home and peace, knew all these truths, and still spoke in foul-mouthed idleness.

A SPRIG OF HOLLY.

I DON'T think a jollier party can ever have assembled itself together than the one that was staying at the Firs last Christmas. The cause of this extraordinary joy and good feeling was to be found, perhaps, in none of us being of kin. There was not so much as a brace of cousins among the guests to mar the harmony, either by their love or hate. Added to this, our hostess had no sons to protect against insidious advances, and no daughters to get off. She could venture to be open-hearted and nobly reliant on the friends she had gathered together without doing violence to the maternal instinct.

The party included every element of success. We had handsome men and intellectual men, men of money and men of mark; and we had flirts, fascinating women, and one heiress.

The Apollo of the party was Lionel Poole, a treasury clerk. His good looks were a perpetual source of discomfort to somebody or other, for they were rather of the plaintive order. His eyes had a habit of saying more than they meant—unconsciously, let us hope, for the sake of his soul, for more than half of his young-lady acquaintances had been bidden adieu by him at night

in a manner that left no doubt whatever on their minds that they were to be the recipients of an offer from him in the morning.

He was so pre-eminently handsome a man that I fear in describing him I may rather slur the indisputable claims he had to be considered something else. Lionel Poole was a clever man also, with a utility talent that turned everything to his own advantage.

To tell the truth, I was more than slightly astonished when I came down into the drawing-room the day of my arrival to find him installed at the Firs.

He was palpably a pampered guest, too, for he had the key of Mrs. Fitzgerald's private photograph album in his hand; and after that lady (our hostess) made her appearance, he went and sat by her side, and made comments that were inaudible to the rest of us, but that, to judge from the expression of his face, were not flattering to the portrayed ones.

Now Mrs. Fitzgerald had, the previous season, come out of the retirement of her widowhood for the first time, for the purpose of chaperoning her young cousin Alice Riley and myself through the shoals and quicksands of London society; and at the end of the season—only such a short time since—poor Alice went into a low state of mind, and on to the Continent, in consequence, it was whispered, of the sudden cessation of the attack Mr. Lionel Poole had made upon a heart that the world had not hardened yet.

I was sorry to see him at the Firs, therefore—sorry, that is, just for a few minutes, in fact, until he left Mrs. Fitzgerald's side and came to mine, where he remained. Ill-natured people had said that the beautiful Mrs. Fitzgerald had not resented his sudden defection from the side of her blonde charge, as it would have been becoming for a chaperon and cousin to do. And they added that the light which came into her eyes when his perfidy was discussed was not kindled by wrath.

She was the most beautiful brunette I ever saw, this young widowed hostess of ours. A graceful, charming

oman, too, with a way that was winning alike to women
ad men. Why she had never married again—she had
een five years a widow—we none of us knew for cer-
ain; but report had told me that her last husband, in
a rabid fit of jealousy, had bound her by a solemn oath
o be faithful for ever to his unpleasant memory.

Only one of the other men have I time or space to
describe. He was a Captain Villars, R.A., and neither
mad, methodist, nor married, as officers of that gallant
corps are popularly supposed to be. He was not such a
handsome man as Lionel Poole, nor could he converse
in so subtly pleasing a way; but he was a man on whom
a woman would rely instinctively, for one glance at his
broad open brow, and frank, fearless, honest eyes
showed clearly, even to the worst read in such matters,
that he was the soul of honour.

The other ladies, too, are deserving of something
better than the scant courtesy of a curt mention; so,
as a curt mention is all I could make of them here, I
will refrain from one at all, and simply say that I was
the heiress.

During the earlier part of my sojourn at the Firs I
did not observe Captain Villars or anybody else, but
Lionel Poole and Mrs. Fitzgerald very much. I had
known the soldier in London before, and then (it was
before I had been left the fortune which altered my
point of view of life entirely) he had seemed to like me
well. But now he stood gravely aloof from me, and I
scarcely noticed the fact, for I was absorbed in the con-
templation of Lionel Poole.

We had a variety of ways of passing the time. No
one thing at the Firs palled upon us by reason of our
doing it often through lack of something else to do.
When it was fine, and the ground not slippery, there
were riding horses and carriages; when it was bitter and
brightly frosty, there was the artificial lake to skate on;
and when we couldn't get out at all, there was the
billiard and music room; and in the evenings we always
had charades and *tableaux*.

In all of these Lionel Poole and Mrs. Fitzgerald excelled. She had a marvellous power of depicting intense passion—love, or hate, or scorn—and he we all declared to be a consummate actor. He was Rizzio to her Mary, Crichton to her Margaret of Navarre, Faust to her Gretchen, Leicester to her Elizabeth (and my Amy Robsart), and he was all things well.

"She is insatiable about private theatricals," he said to me one morning when we were knocking the billiard balls about together. "I'm sick of playing at being Mrs. Fitzgerald's lover."

I could not resist giving him a hasty glance as he spoke, for I wished to believe him, and wanted to read the truth in his face. His tender greyish-blue eyes (*how* tender they had been last night, when as the dying Italian minstrel he had fixed them on his royal mistress!) met mine unflinchingly, and I blushed.

"You must be aware, Miss Travers," he went on in a low voice, "that it was not to act the part of Mrs. Fitzgerald's lover that I came down to the Firs."

I had already weakly begun to hope that it was not, but I could only say now, "You act the part remarkably well."

"She forces it upon me," he said; and as he spoke Captain Villars came into the room, and the two men stiffened themselves at each other in that indescribable way men have of showing their mutual annoyance when a woman is the cause of it.

I soon left them together, for their ill-concealed dissatisfaction was depressing, and betook myself to Mrs. Fitzgerald's dressing-room, to which, in earlier days of our intercourse, I had always been allowed free access. It was locked against me now, but she presently opened the door and addmitted me with an air of the old welcome.

"Do I disturb you?" I asked.

"Oh, no," she answered, "but I thought you were in the billiard-room with Lion—with Mr. Poole."

"Well, I got tired of billiards, so I have left him to

play with Captain Villars," I answered carelessly; "I thought I'd come to you," I continued, "and ask if you would tell me the rights of the story about Alice Riley."

"I didn't know that there was any story about her."

"Did Mr. Poole behave badly to her?" I interrogated, eagerly; for though my heart was nearly gone, I thought that I could withdraw it from a man who had been cruel to gentle Alice Riley.

"No, he did not," she replied, almost sharply. "Alice Riley was a little goose, and deceived herself."

"I'm glad to hear it was only that," I answered, absently, and then she flung her arms round my neck and kissed me, and said—

"Dearest Eva, believe me that it was so. Don't distrust me."

"She knows that he loves me, then," I thought, for I was blind to the fact of its being herself that Blanche Fitzgerald was thinking about.

"How well a sprig of holly would look in your fair hair," Lionel Poole murmured to me a little later in the day; "the vivid green leaves, and the brilliant veins, and the bright golden locks would intensify one another."

I resolved immediately upon wearing one that night; but I would not tell him so. He should have the benefit of the full force of the flattery by seeing it in my hair.

It was to please and honour Lionel Poole that I at first decided to wear the sprig of holly.

I hardly know how it came about, but it did come about in a few minutes after this, that Lionel Poole made me believe that I had been the object that attracted him to Mrs. Fitzgerald's party so constantly during the past season, and that Mrs. Fitzgerald knew that it was so.

I suppose I believed it all firmly, for when our interview was over, he had proposed and I had accepted him; and to spare my blushes, he had suggested, with a vast show of magnanimity, to keep it quiet until after my departure.

"May I not—had I not better tell Blanche?" I asked; and he said—

"Well, I think not, Eva dear. She'll be so delighted at her expectations being realized that she'll air the fact, and then you will have no peace."

About an hour after this I put on my balmorals, did my dress up in the most symmetrical vandykes, put on a seal-skin paletot, and a cavalier hat and scarlet feather, and sallied forth into the snow-covered park in search of a sprig of holly befitting the occasion. I did not claim Mr. Lionel's escort, for I wanted to be alone to realize my new prospects.

At a short distance from the house I met Captain Villars. "Are you going to join the others, Miss Travers?" he asked. And I told him, "No; what others? and don't stop me, please; I'm to get something and go in and dress for dinner."

"Don't be in such haste to quit me," he said, rather mournfully. "I'm going away to-morrow."

"Going away?"

"Yes," he said, stoutly. "It's no use a man making an offer when he knows he'll be refused. But I can't stop any longer and witness your indifference." And then seeing that I looked sorry, I suppose, he went on, "And it makes my blood boil to see a woman I respect as I do Mrs. Fitzgerald, tolerate and encourage a heartless scoundrel."

I did not condescend to reply to this attack on Lionel, but I drew myself up indignantly, and pranced off on my high heels like a loyal goat. I tried to think that it was of no consequence, and that I had just as soon it was so. But all the time I felt sore and annoyed that Captain Villars should despise and condemn, however unjustly, the man I was going to marry.

"In spite of his having loved me in vain himself," I said to myself, romantically, as I walked in the direction of a thick holly hedge, "I hope that in time, when I'm married, Captain Villars will do justice to Lionel's noble qualities, and that we shall all be friends."

I attributed noble qualities to Lionel on the strength of his eyes being large and plaintive, and his nose delicately chiselled; and I thought his judgment sound, naturally enough, because he had chosen me!

The holly hedge ran along straight for a considerable distance, and then curled itself round in a small circle, in the centre of which stood an arbutus. On no portion of the straight part could I find a sprig that fulfilled all my requirements. I wanted plenty of berries, not in heavy masses, but judiciously sprinkled amongst the leaves. I could have pleased myself in Michel's or Eagle's ever so much sooner, I was fain to confess, as I grew bluer momentarily in the search. At last I came to the circle, entrance to which was nearly blocked up by the branches of the arbutus, and there full in view, but at an elevation which I could not attain from the sunken path on which I stood, was a magnificent spray of holly.

Its leaves were vivid, glossy, gemlike, and its berries were so fairly placed between and about them, that I recanted what I had just given utterance to respecting Michel's and Eagle's. The ground inside was considerably higher, it was thickly turfed, and, in addition to this, the snow lay in frozen masses, for the sun's rays could scarcely penetrate the recesses of that gloomy little nook.

"I must have it," I said, and I stepped into that magic circle which was to be the means of disclosing to me many things; and scarcely had I entered it when I heard voices coming up the path behind.

I did not recognise the voices till they approached my nook, where I had no fancy for being discovered getting the holly that Lionel admired. But when they came close I found that the disturbers of my solitude were Mrs. Fitzgerald and the man to whom I had betrothed myself.

Her tones were passionate and warm; his low, distinct, and calm; they both fell clearly upon my ears; and

from the moment I heard her first words, for Blanche's sake, as well as my own, I could not betray myself.

"I have told you the truth," she said; "what is your answer to it, Lionel?"

"That I cannot ask you to sacrifice so much to my selfish love, dearest," he answered, tenderly. "No, Blanche, I am not so careless of you as you, even though loving me, had supposed. I cannot ask you to be my wife, dear, since it would cost you so much.

I cowered down trembling with rage in my secluded nook as the pair paused at the entrance.

"If you would not count the cost," she murmured fondly, "I could bear poverty, even penury with you, Lionel, rather than be the mistress of the Firs with an empty, blighted heart."

There was such simple womanly eloquence in her soul-fraught tones! My sympathies were all with her—with this woman who loved with a self-sacrificing love the man who had asked me to marry him that morning. What a double game he had been playing to bring such a climax about!

"Do not tempt me," he said; "for your own sake do not tempt me to make you violate the condition of that cruel will. I should be a coward to win you from such a place and position to share such a fate as mine."

"Then why have you won my heart?" she cried with a great sob. And then I heard her light footsteps flying away, and I was left alone with only a hedge intervening between myself and this perjured man, who had won my promise to be his wife, though he affected love for another woman at the time, and only abstained from wedding her because I was the richer prize.

I read our mutual self-deceptions aright at that moment. I knew that poor Blanche had unconsciously deceived me, and that I had unconsciously deceived her, and that Lionel had wittingly deceived us both. But I did not see my way clearly out of this mass of deception yet; for I was engaged to this man; and I

could not shame my friend by letting her know that I had heard that which would honourably relieve me from Mr. Poole.

I saw it all as I cowered under the holly hedge and he stood chewing the cud of meditation outside. I saw how he had fooled us both to the top of our bent till he had learnt which of the two was the richer woman. He had finally decided in my favour, though why he had done so before Mrs. Fitzgerald had told him (as I gathered from her broken words that she had done) that she would lose her possessions by a second marriage, I was at a loss to imagine.

I shrank from the idea of going out and disclosing myself, and yet he made no move, and it was getting near the dressing hour and I was very cold! I could not feel sentimental, do all I would. This man seemed to me too thoroughly base and mean, with his trickery and calculations, for me to waste a thought about again. But I had liked him very much before I knew him to be the mere mercenary man he was; while, in fact, he was still an Apollo to me, and I did not desire to put him to the open confusion of coming out and detecting him. So I cowered behind my hedge and gazed at my holly sprig fondly: I resolved to wear it still on its own merits entirely, and not for the sake of my recreant lover, Lionel Poole.

He had stood perfectly quiescent for some minutes, apparently quite staggered by the sudden flight of Mrs. Fitzgerald, but he came back to animation with a light laugh presently and exclaimed—

"By Jove! that topmost spray would be the very thing for little Eva—killed two birds with one stone by coming here—I gained a true statement of the widow's finances, and I mean to gain a head-dress that will completely subjugate her vain little heart for Miss Travers."

I had resolved upon wearing that holly spray, but I felt that I could not take it from his hands! So now I rose from my crouching posture with an immense effort

—drew myself up to my full height, which isn't colossal, and jumped at the coveted prize. He heard my efforts to gain it, and he saw a gauntlet glove gather the little sprig, but he did not see *me*, nor did he suspect it was me, for he walked away with a muttered imprecation for having been overheard by any one.

I tore back to the house and arrayed myself in a rush for dinner. I gathered all my golden curls in a mass behind, and fastened them with a jet comb, from which depended the precious sprig of holly in the search for which I had found the blessed truth that saved me from being that miserable thing, a wife married for her money. Then I went down to dinner, and had the satisfaction of seeing that Mr. Lionel Poole was considerably agitated by the sight thereof.

"Don't go away to-morrow," I whispered to Captain Villars when the gentlemen joined us after dinner. And he said, "No, he wouldn't, if I really meant it." Lionel Poole was rather *distrait* for a time, but he recovered himself as the evening went, and came up to me as I sat on the sofa by Mrs. Fitzgerald, for we had not got up a charade that night.

"I want you to play me something," he said; and when I rose and walked to the piano, he whispered—

"On the whole, Eva, dearest, I think you had better tell your friend of our engagement at once—that is, to-night. I shall leave the Firs early in the morning, and I could wish you to curtail your visit in order that we may meet in London again soon. I shall see your father to-morrow."

"There will be no occasion for your doing so, Mr. Poole," I answered, "and though I think it will be a becoming thing on your part to leave the Firs as soon as possible, still I must beg that you will not consider me in the matter at all."

"Why, Eva!" he said. "I don't like transformations usually, but this less than any I have ever seen."

He tried to take my hand, and I could not avoid recoiling, for I felt how base he must have been to

have won such a passionate protest from Blanche Fitzgerald.

"Hedges have ears, Mr. Poole," I replied, "and the next time you propose making two offers in one day with reservations don't let it be behind a thick holly fence."

I pointed as I spoke to my vivid brilliant ornament, and he glanced at it and accepted his defeat.

"Then you were there?" he said presently.

"I was there," I replied; "and though I have nothing to tell Mrs Fitzgerald, I shall say good-bye to you when I leave the room to-night. She shall not hear anything from me, therefore she will think you one degree better than you are—which will still leave you not too bright an object of contemplation."

"I will show you that I am not so wholly bad," he said. And I did not believe him then. But this year I am compelled to admit that there was a strong alloy of goodness in this man to whom I was engaged for two hours before I married Captain Villars. For I have just had a note from Blanche (Fitzgerald no longer) asking us to spend Christmas with them in the new handsome Kensington mansion Lionel Poole worked so hard to gain when he found that the woman who loved him would lose "The Firs" for his sake.

And this result would never have been obtained had I not gone in search of a sprig of holly.

TRUST HER NOT.

CHAPTER I.

THERE is a sluggish softness in the air. It is the first week in August, and July has been damp enough to relax everything in nature, damp enough even to relax the will of the indomitable woman who is tramping along the three miles of dusty road that intervene between her village home and the small market town where she can get butter at a reasonable price.

Butter at a reasonable price is a great consideration with Miss Paulett; so are eggs, so are meat and bread and house rent. So, indeed, is everything. For she is "a maiden all forlorn," trying to live like a gentlewoman on a very limited income.

For ten years now she has pursued her neat little inoffensive way in this village of Binham, which is striving hard to debase itself into a villa surrounded town.

Her house is the end house of a picturesque unpretentious little crescent, which can boast of a good-sized well-kept garden in front, and which is shut off from the high road and the gaze of passers-by by a high red brick wall, that is well crowned with ivy. The

house is exactly like every other house in the crescent in reality. But it looks very different to the others. Its windows are brighter, its brass door knob has a higher polish than those of the other houses in the crescent.

She is rather more anxious than usual to-day as to the results of her marketing at Balsingham. A young niece has come down, a fastidious young lady, who requires to be daintily served, without at all considering at what cost the service is rendered.

The young niece is at home now in the pretty bowery room in the house in the crescent that is parlour and dining-room and drawing-room and boudoir, all in one. This sluggishly soft air makes Miss Minnie Ward sleepy, so she reclines while her aunt goes in search of butter for the fair young being's tea.

She is very pretty, very pleasant to look at, albeit she is bored, and hot, and sleepy, and slightly cross on this sluggishly softly warm day. Curled up like a cat on the sofa in the shadiest corner of the room, she is lazily watching the shadows come and go through the half-drawn drab Venetian blinds. "How can they have the patience to go on doing *that*?" she wonders. "How can any one have the patience to go on doing anything down here?" She gets up as she half mutters this wonder, and stands at the window, balancing herself, her well-shaped hands planted firmly on her well-shaped hips, in a semi-defiant attitude that would have called forth her grandmother's reprobation. She is "tall and stately," and she has nice eyes, and pretty yellowish hair. Evidently she knows how to have her clothes made, and how to put them on in a way that will make her at least remarkable. Her hair is tumbled now, for she has been asleep for an hour; but when its yellow luxuriance is toned down a little, we can easily imagine that the jet dagger may stab her tresses becomingly enough. At present the weapon looks out of place.

She has a natural turn-up nose and an acquired toss of the head, and these two things have to do very hard

work in Minnie's service. For she conceives that in order to do them justice she must be bewitchingly saucy in manner.

To be brief, Miss Ward is spending her holidays with her aunt for convenience sake, and sorely against her own sweet will. She is a governess, satisfied with her situation because she does not see a means of bettering it yet; but keenly on the look-out for promotion. At times, when no one is looking, there is a good deal of weariness in the fresh fair young face, and a good deal of discontent and disgust with the world for not recognising her claims better, in the young high spirit. Even now, when she turns away from the window with a sudden remembrance of her tousled hair, and the onus that was on her of being neat by tea-time, she ejaculates impatiently,

"Oh, dear! a week more of this, and then back to that *horrid* teaching!"

She goes up yawning and weary to the little white nest of a room that her aunt has given up to her, the aunt retiring herself into a room in the rear of the house, barren and arid by comparison.

It is time to put this maiden aunt before you. She is almost at the threshold of her own door when Minnie goes up to adorn for the sacrifice, as she considers it, of a "regular set tea" at six o'clock. Miss Paulett has walked fast, and has come home heavily laden, and the air is oppressive. But in spite of the weariness of the flesh, she brightens up in spirit as she comes through the crescent garden, and hopes heartily that "Minnie will enjoy the treats."

She has been living ten years in this secluded village alone, and her young niece of twenty calls her "an old maid." But in spite of these things she is a woman with a long lease of life before her, in all human probability. For she is healthy, and only just past her thirtieth birthday. It seems almost a pity that this probably long life should be lonely as the last ten years of it have been.

She is not tall and lissom, like her twenty-year old niece, but she is erect, graceful, admirably proportioned. Her face is clear complexioned, delicate featured, brightened by a pair of nut-brown eyes that are precisely the same colour as the luxuriant hair that is wrapped in a clever coil at the back of her head. Altogether she is a pretty and a prepossessing woman, and why she should be lonely still is a marvel to many people.

She looks round the room, and a shade of annoyance crosses her face swiftly. It is one of her attributes to be daintily neat. The small room, that is at the same time dining hall and saloon, is always fresh and fair, and scrupulously well arranged when she is alone; now the cushions are piled up untidily, the sofa-rug is trailing on to the floor. Books, newspapers, magazines, and a half-made white muslin tunic are littered about on different chairs; and, worst of all, in her progress from the room Miss Ward has upset a light wicker stand of flowers, which has stood in safety just inside the door during the whole of the summer.

Miss Paulett has just fulfilled a portion of her mission in life by clearing up after her niece, when that young lady comes undulating into the room. Her hair is tousled still, but now according to certain rules; and the big jet dagger stabs it with a well-defined aim. She has put on fresh laces and fresh ribbons. The laces are not real, and the ribbons are poor and flimsy, but her youth and beauty triumph over these facts, and cause them to look bright and becoming.

"Oh! you're back, Aunt Catherine? I'm glad of that; I want you to go out on the green for a stroll with me."

From her bed-room window Minnie has seen a manly form—the only manly form in the place—take the direction of the green. Hence her desire for exercise. She would look upon it as a wilful disregard of a providential opportunity if she did not go out now.

"My dear Minnie, just consider that I am only just

back from Balsingham, and that I'm rather tired. Do let me have my tea first."

"Why did you go? What could induce you to go rushing off in the heat of this afternoon?" Minnie feels disappointed, and so speaks crossly.

"I went to get butter and fruit," pointing to those delicacies.

"Butter and fruit!" Minnie shrugs her supple shoulders. "I'd rather go without them any day; why didn't you send that grampus, Bridget? If she walked more she wouldn't puff me out of my mind nearly every time she comes into the room with her hard breathing."

Miss Paulett laughs. "Bridget had her work to do. And what has put you out, my little lady? Have some tea, dear."

"No, thank you, Aunt." When Minnie first came, the still young aunt had requested that her niece would call her "Kate," but Minnie very decidedly refused to do it. "There shall be no mistake about my being the niece, and years the younger of the two," she sagaciously determined.

"No, thank you, aunt; there's something unholy in tea at this time of day, unless you dine after it. I'll go out on the green, you can join me by-and-by." Then she half repents herself of her rudeness, and adds, "I shall like some of that nice cream cheese for supper, if I may have it."

"You may have what you like, dear; yes, I will join you by-and-by," the aunt says, good-temperedly.

So Minnie's conscience feels clear, and she rings for Bridget to bring her hat and blue llama shawl, the ends of which she will presently toss over her shoulder, in a jaunty way that has neither the merit of being pretty nor uncommon, but that is immensely popular with young ladies.

Minnie walks on perfectly satisfied with herself, her head wobbling up and down occasionally in little fluttering paroxysms of conceit. The colour deepens

in the face that she holds very much up and a little on one side as she steps on to the green, and the well-opened blue eyes dance. For there, a hundred yards ahead of her, is the manly form, reclining on one of the seats.

Unluckily the manly nose is turned away from her that it may sniff in so much of breeze as there is. Minnie has come to Binham on an unacknowledged mission. It is her bounden duty to herself, she feels, to do something definite during this campaign. The only "something definite" that a girl of Minnie's calibre cares to achieve is matrimony.

Her object is well before her now, but it would hardly do for her to go up and sit down by him, and let him see that she has followed him on purpose. She turns slightly, therefore, and saunters along skirting the green until she is on the other side of it, quite in his line of vision.

And now she knows that her work is done.

In a few minutes she hears footsteps behind her. Another minute and the manly form is by her side taking off its hat, and looking ridiculously pleased. It is Mr. Boughton, the curate in charge of Binham—a good-looking man of one or two and thirty.

Up to within the last twelvemonth Mr. Boughton had steadily advocated the celibacy of the priesthood. But since that time he has modified his views, and this change has been attributed in a great measure to his increasing intimacy with Miss Paulett. Now Binham did not grudge him his particular attention to the handsome, fresh-hearted, clear-headed, unaffected, woman. On the contrary, Binham declared that they would be a delightful pair. But it was intolerant to the daring of the stranger within the gates who flirted at him with such effrontery.

He is quite conscious that she is flirting with him. He sees that she puts herself at her best as soon as he approaches her, that she makes her eyes sparkle, and looks admiringly at *his* eyes, and he likes it.

It is useless to deny it. He does like it. He has indulged in many powerfully-worded Jeremiads against Jezebels generally; he has cautioned the young men of his flock against Circe in all her forms. But now, when Minnie Ward puts a feather in her hat at him, and wraps a blue shawl mysteriously about her lithesome shoulders at him, and gazes with a look that only misses being a look of love by one hairsbreadth of intervening modesty at him, he likes it.

His eyes are very fine, and his appearance and manners very gentlemanly and refined, and his prospects are very good, and she is sick to death of teaching. Given such conditions in such a situation, and it is not difficult to guess what will ensue.

"Is Miss Paulett not coming out this evening?" he asks, when they have taken a turn round the green, to the dismay and disgust of the occupants of all the villas.

"Aunt Catherine? No; I couldn't drag her out, so I braved a solitary stroll. I shan't have many more walks on the green."

"Why not?" he asks with a qualm.

"I'm going away next week. Mamma will have me home again."

She has a morbid horror of its being known here that she is out as a governess; and she has made her aunt vow silence on the point. To "mamma," therefore, it becomes necessary to impute a greed for her child's society which amounts to selfishness.

They are on the verge of the green now, at the farthest end from the village. The ruins of an old abbey are in sight. Beyond the abbey there is a wood. She tosses her pretty head in the direction of the wood and says:

"How sweet it would be of me to take dear lazy old Aunt Catherine a bouquet of wild flowers!"

A faint spark of loyalty to charming Miss Paulett is still alive in Boughton's breast. He is preparing to say something that shall testify to his admiration for

and sympathy with Miss Paulett's tastes, when Minnie adds:

"She is so *fond* of things—of cats and flowers; it's a pity she hasn't something better to love instead of wasting all her life in bemoaning some one who didn't care for her."

The sole remaining spark of loyalty dies out. "Has she done that? Let us go and get the wild flowers, Miss Ward; I know where the best live in that wood."

"Can you spare the time?" she asks, softly. "Oh! how good of you! My last walk at Binham will be my pleasantest one."

Mr. Boughton has a maiden aunt living with him who keeps his house, and drives off the unwary who approach him when she is near. She has for some time had her auntly eye on Minnie, and Minnie has a delicious little sense of satisfaction now in having brought things to this pass. No aunt, neither his nor hers, shall come between them now.

She sits upon a stile, and he stands close by her side. And the rays of the setting sun stream through the leafy boughs, and glorify her head. It is all very pleasant, but Minnie feels, in her own forcible idiom, "that mere pleasantness won't pay."

For a few moments she forces herself to contemplate each side of the shield. If she marries Mr. Boughton she will have to lead a Binham life, and when he is her husband she will not be able to infuse an element of excitement into her Binham life by flirting with him. It will be dull probably—but——

"But it will be better than horrid teaching," she reminds herself. She has no more sense of moral responsibility concerning what she is about to do than a child has of knocking down a house of cards.

"I've altered my mind about the flowers I gather to-night, Mr. Boughton. They must be for your study. Will you have them?"

"Will I not!"

His face is in the shade, and looks very well there. Minnie adjusts her head at a becoming angle, and makes another effort.

"Aunt Catherine, with that good, serviceable, common-sense of hers, would jeer at me for being romantic if she heard me say that I should like to take a tiny bit of this stile away to wear in a locket as a charm."

He knows that she means him to think that she loves the stile because he is leaning upon it with her, in what a poet would call the "gloaming." He knows all she means, and he likes it.

He takes his knife out and defrauds the lord of the manor by cutting a squre inch out of the stile. He would defraud twenty lords of the manor of twenty times the value of this square inch of stile at this juncture to please Minnie Ward.

With rather a shaky hand he proceeds to cut his initials, "E. B.," on the little bit of wood. He trims it and smooths it, and then he looks at her.

She gives him one look, and he forgets all his views as to the propriety of the clergy being a celibate body.

"May I cut yours here, too?" he asks, and she bends down her head and whispers "Yes," and when she comes down from the stile she is engaged to him.

As she leans upon his arm she makes him understand that life will be a wilderness to her until she has the right and the power to so lean always. He has his own views about short engagements—he disapproves of them—but he thinks that her sweet soul trembles at the prospect of ever so brief a separation from him. And he believes it—good young priest as he is.

"Then it had better be soon," he says eagerly. Why he says it he can't exactly define, but he gathers up impressions that it had better be soon, and speaks from the impulse they give him.

"Oh, if you wish it!"

Of course he wished it. Suddenly he found himself wishing it very much, and feeling that all his pre-

conceived ideas on the subject were utter folly and empty humbug. Minnie would be a crown of honour to a husband, and he, Edward Boughton, would crown himself as soon as possible.

She is very full of the pride of her success as she steps out from the shade of the wood on to the open green. Her head settles back into a satisfied wobble as she sees Aunt Catherine approaching them.

Miss Paulett comes towards the pair in the dim light, and as she comes on it is made manifest to her, in even the dim light, that something has happened.

CHAPTER II.

For four days Minnie has been very happy and very amiable. Edward Boughton manages to make duty and inclination agree wonderfully well. When he goes abroad on missions of mercy Minnie accompanies him—a fashionable looking angel in different coloured cambrics.

Her aunt, Kate Paulett, has been told the great news, and has been cordial and cheery. *His* aunt, Miss Boughton, has been told and has been morose and gloomy. Minnie is not one bit disturbed by either woman's state or expression of feeling. She merely remarks to Edward—

"Your aunt looks so sour about it that one would think it was a crime to love you; as if I could help it."

Minnie means marriage as soon as possible, and now, on the evening of the fourth day of her engagement, she is feeling a little annoyed and perplexed because the time is not definitely fixed yet.

"You might speak to him, Aunt Catherine."

"About naming the day? No, my dear, it's for him to speak to you about that."

"But what's the good of waiting? What are we waiting for?" Minnie pouts.

"You haven't waited long," Kate reminds her.

"No, and I don't mean to wait long, that's another thing; we shall not know each other a bit the better while he is down here and I'm going on with that horrid, horrid teaching. I don't see why we need wait."

"*You* can hardly be the one to suggest a speedy marriage," Kate says drily; "but I have no doubt, when Mr. Boughton realises that you consider your present one a life of slavery, he will speedily rescue you from it."

Minnie flushes. "I don't want him to know anything about my present life," she says, with an effort to seem at ease.

Kate flashes up a glance from the preserving pan over which she has been bending assiduously over the conversation.

"You *don't* mean to say that you haven't told him?"

"I have not. Why should I? Men are quite apt enough to *think* they confer a favour on a girl by proposing marriage. If the girl's a governess they *know* they confer a favour by taking her out of bondage."

"He ought to know it; if you don't tell him I will," Kate says, skimming off the scum vigorously.

"Don't be malicious and spiteful because you have failed to get him yourself," says Minnie.

"You'd serve your own ends (I know what they are, Minnie,) better by telling him a truth that is honourable to you; but rest assured that I will never interfere between you after that—that very coarse, cruel speech."

It is settled between the lovers soon that they are to marry in a year. By that time Minnie will be twenty-one, and he will have a suitable home to receive her in. This delay will enable him to settle his aunt elsewhere. "She broke up her home to come down here with me," he explains.

"She'll be desperately fussy about a house. I know she will keep you unsettled as long as she can."

His greatest comfort (he is dreadfully in love) when Minnie is gone is to go to her aunt Kate and talk about her. Kate is merciful enough to let him maunder on uninterruptedly, as a rule, but one day she does hint to him that Minnie is but mortal.

"Minnie can ill bear stagnation and suspense," she says. "I shall be glad when you can take your holiday and go and see her. You'll go soon, won't you?"

Something in her tone sets him thinking. It does not exactly alarm him, but it startles him.

"Is she ill? Have you heard"——But Miss Paulett interrupts him impatiently before he can say a word more:

"Ill? Oh, no! If there were anything the matter my sister would have written for me to go and help to nurse her. I rarely hear when she is well."

"'Twere long to tell and vain to hear" about all he does in order to get a free week from his parish. He will not drop a single service, but he must see Minnie.

Eventually one of the reserve force—a curate unattached to a cure at present—comes for a consideration and takes charge of Binham for a fortnight, and Edward Boughton goes up to town by the express to surprise his loving, loyal Minnie.

Surprises are odious things under the most propitious circumstances. He no sooner is across the threshold of the earthly paradise than he feels that it would have been better far if he had notified his coming to the presiding Peri.

Mrs. Ward, Minnie's mamma, lives in lodgings in Vansittart Terrace, Keningston. Vansittart Terrace is more than rather out of the way, but when you have wriggled yourself into the right path that leads to it, it is pleasant enough.

Minnie's teaching is in the neighbourhood. She gets home generally about six o'clock. For several

days she has had an escort home—a soldier cousin of the girls whom she is instructing.

When Edward Boughton is announced Mrs. Ward falls into a paroxysm of bewilderment. Minnie's lover, and there's nothing ready for dinner! And Minnie may arrive at any moment, suspiciously attended; and —oh! what shall she do?

Mr. Boughton asks one or two awkward questions. Mrs. Ward evades the questions—parries them—answers them deftly and sweetly. Presently there is a knock at the front door, and as Edward goes to the window Mrs. Ward gets herself out of the room, "to see about tea."

Minnie comes in to the hall radiant; an enamoured young man follows her, and Mrs. Ward meets them with despair printed on her matronly brow. She whispers to Minnie, and Minnie is staggered. For a moment only though; at the end of the moment *she* whispers to Mr. Gascoigne, and dismisses him.

Edward Boughton standing at the window sees the handsome young soldier officer walking away; but he does not for one moment associate that son of Mars with the fresh fair creature who presently bounds into the room, and seeks to make him believe that she is grateful that Heaven has made her such a man as he is.

Up to the present moment Mr. Gascoigne, though he is on the brink, has not taken the plunge. He is rapidly preparing to fall at her feet, but he has not fallen yet. Therefore, if Edward Boughton has come to plead for an earlier wedding-day Minnie will be fidelity itself to him.

She manages very cleverly, she considers, during Edward's visit. She writes a pretty note of apology to her employer, pleading a bronchial affection as the cause of her non-appearance. She writes a pathetic little note to her martial adorer, telling him that for a time, at least, it is better that they should not meet—a note which is worded in a way that leads him to sup-

pose that his mother has been interfering, and to vow that he will propose to the sweetest, jolliest little girl in the world the next time he sees her.

Minnie holds Boughton's heart in the hollow of her little unscrupulous hand. She does not spare him a single look, word, art, that may allure him on to love her more and more. She is full of coaxing, pretty, caressing ways, and these she plays off upon him as pertinaciously as Kathleen played hers off upon St. Kevin. He is desperately in love with her. Not a doubt of her being to the full as desperately in love with him has even clouded his mind for a moment.

He goes back to Binham at the end of his holiday, a happy man. For three days after his return from that sojourn in Paradise he hears regularly from Minnie.

The fifth and sixth mornings are blanks. He begins to look worn and anxious.

On the morning of the eighth day he gets a letter in the well-known dearly-loved handwriting, and when he has read a few lines of it his face, which had been pale before, becomes ghastly white. But he says nothing to his aunt, who is watching him pitifully, and her prophetic heart tells her that he has "got a blow from that girl."

A letter goes from him to Minnie by return of post, such as might melt a stone. But it is powerless to melt the heart of a heartless girl. Then he waits for three days in silence, with such wounded feeling, such passionate love preying upon him that he gets to look so miserably ill that every one in the place calls on Miss Paulett in the hope of hearing that the lovers have quarrelled.

On the third day he has another letter from Minnie, a conclusive letter. A letter that shocks all hope out of his heart, and all belief in the good pure love of a woman out of his mind.

It is the topic in Binham for nine days, for it leaks out, as such things invariably do. At the end of nine

days people cease to look as if they are thinking about it when they meet him.

The aunt and niece cross swords by post, and wound each other freely. Minnie is to be Mrs. Gascoigne in a week or two, and "Garrison town life will suit her much better than prancing through the parish," she says.

But in spite of this depreciatory speech Mrs. Gascoigne feels a sore pricking at her heart when, two years after she achieves her own destiny, she reads that, "Old Aunt Catherine and Edward Boughton are married."

ON THE EDGE OF THE MOOR.

A SOFT low-lying purple haze floats over the moor. It has been intensely hot all day, and the evening breeze has not sprung up yet. By-and-bye, when the sun (now making a sea of heather on fire in the west) has quite set, Mrs. Kane will venture a little further from the farm-yard gate to watch for the one who is coming.

Once or twice already her poor anxious old face has brightened up under the impression that she sees something moving at the vanishing point of the rugged cart-road that is the channel of communication between this farm-house on the edge of Dartmoor and civilisation. But the impression has been a false one, born of a hope that is not to be realised just yet. Indeed, reason tells her that it is idle to expect her traveller one hour before that traveller can possibly arrive.

Mrs. Kane listens to reason at last. She goes back through the farm-yard, "not so well stocked as it was when she was home last, poor maid," she thinks, with a pang of unselfish sorrow, into the cool moist red dairy. The butter has been made to-day. Butter that to-morrow will command the readiest sale in the Barnstaple market. It looks rich and firm, as her butter

has always been reputed to look. But there is less of it than of old, and the weary shake of the good grey head, that has never shaken repiningly when she alone has been concerned, is at the quantity, not at the quality.

But she takes one of the plumpest pats, and fills a bowl with the richest cream from one of the flat pans, and goes away out of the dairy and into the kitchen, where a table is already well covered with country dainties. There is a chicken-pie, a shape of damson jam, and a glass dish with a cover containing a great luscious piece of honeycomb. There are fresh eggs, and tempting loaves of brown and white home-made bread. And as she adds the butter and cream to the display the mother hopes that "Alice will be happy, and enjoy it all."

"This'll be the air to give her an appetite," she adds, with a pleased sense of part proprietorship in the air. "The best air in the world, her poor father used to say, and he should ha' known, for he was born in it, and his father and grandfather before him, for the matter of that."

She sits down in the high handsome chair that stands on one side of the fireplace, wherein a feathery bunch of asparagus foliage is waving, or rather would be waving if there were the faintest breath of breeze to stir it. Sits down and folds her hands over the dead black Coburg dress, and smooths out the wide weepers that mark her a widow, and strives to make her loving, anxious heart beat calmly and patiently.

She looks a very gentlewoman as she sits there, her still bright dark eyes bent on the door, her soft grey hair put back plainly under the dead white border of the widow's cap. A very gentlewoman, indeed; not a lady; Mrs. Kane never wishes, never has wished to be thought to be "above her class." But a woman so full of natural gentleness and intelligence that she can never wound the feelings or the taste of any genuinely refined person.

Up to within the last three months Mrs. Kane has been one of the most capable farm-house wives in that bold, active, independent district, where the soil is made productive by incessant toil. But she has had a seizure. The brave heart that never quailed under any reverses while her husband lived, kept her up to the mark of the labour that was needful when he died. But the brain was overtasked by its sense of responsibility, and when she recovered partially from the blow that prostrated body and will for a time, her powers, her vigour, had fled, and only her indomitable perseverance remained to be the ruling spirit of the farm.

It is a freehold property this, on which the picturesque, quaint, thatched, many-gabled farm-house stands. And it has been in the Kane family for generations. If she could only go on, as she had gone on for five years after her husband's death, she might look forward to gratifying the wish that is nearest to her heart, namely, that she may be able to leave it to Alice as her father left it. But she has been stricken down, and things have gone unkindly with the cattle and the sheep, and—"well, she has many blessings," she tells herself in a burst of heartfelt gratitude as she thinks of Alice.

There is an opportune stir in the house and about the house at this very moment. Jane—a ubiquitous and highly-gifted young person, who is cook, house and dairy-maid, superintendent of the pigs and poultry, vender of the butter, cream, and eggs, on market-days—comes stumbling in more clumsily, smilingly, amiably than is usual even with her. The yard-dog barks, and preforms a war-dance at the extreme end of his chain. The cocks and hens flutter backwards and forwards across the yard in the inconsequent way natural to them when anything of an extraordinary nature occurs in their vicinity, and Mrs. Kane gets up and goes out with a little more flush on her face, a little more flutter about her hands, and looks along the road, and sees Alice.

"There was a pony-chay to fetch her the last time," the mother thinks, half-sorrowfully, as the market-cart lumbers up. But now Alice is out of the cart, embracing her mother, shaking Jane's hand, which is little less rugged than the road, and patting the old dog's head, laughing and crying, and declaring herself deafened by the fowls, all in one minute.

"You're better, mother? say you're better," she says presently, when she is seated at the tea-table. There is a wistful look in her eyes, lightly as she speaks, as they take in every change, every sign of loss of power and gain of years in her mother.

"It's done my eyes good to see you," Mrs. Kane says, warmly. And indeed Alice is a sight to do other eyes than her mother's good.

Alice is what it has been allowed her mother is not —quite a lady. Quite a lady in mind and manners and appearance; quite a lady in frank, honest dignity—in the delicacy of her speech, and tone, and dress. A handsome, tall, well-formed girl, with a clear strong head, and a pure strong heart, she fully deserves all the pride her mother feels in her.

Mrs. Kane looks—she can't help looking as they move so lightly about the tea-things—at the smooth white hands that are so daintily kept and cared for. She thinks, regretfully, of how they will get roughened and embrowned in doing the work that she has done cheerfully and gladly for so many years. But she does not put that sorrow into words yet. She resolutely twinkles away a tear, and consoles herself with the thought that it "won't be long before Robert Ford will come and take all the toil and trouble of the farm off Alice's hands."

Can Alice be thinking of the same thing? Nothing leads up to the question apparently, yet she suddenly asks:

"How are the Fords, mother dear? Is Robert married yet?"

"Married yet! why, no, you don't ask!" Mrs. Kane

is so perplexed that she falls into the vulgar tongue employed by Jane during that young person's moments of amazement, which are many.

"But I do ask!" Alice says, rising up and taking the office of putting away upon herself at once. "Poor dear Rob! he's as slow about that as about everything else, I see."

"He hasn't been slow in turning over the tidy bit of money that his father left him," Mrs. Kane begins indignantly; but the indignation vanishes before the laughing bright keen gaze that is turned full upon her from behind the cupboard-door.

"Dear mother! it's so easy to turn it when once one has the tidy bit; but I'm glad to hear he has been so—lucky; and how's Dolly?"

"Dolly came here the other day with a hayrick on the back of her head, and a great wire frame over her poor hips, that she called a dress-improver." Mrs. Kane pauses when she utters this awful word, and looks as if she expected Alice to make a remark. Accordingly, Alice makes one, though she scarcely feels justified in doing so, not having given due consideration to the iniquity.

"Well!" she says.

"Well! is that all you can find to say? well, I told Miss Dolly what I thought of such folly, and what I knew you would think of such folly in a miller's daughter aping the silliness of her betters; you don't wear such things, Alice." And Mrs Kane, as she speaks, looks at Alice's handsome head, round the back of which the hair is rolled in a thick coil, and at her straight lissom figure, about which the folds of a clear neutral-tinted muslin dress fall very softly and gracefully.

"No-o; I don't wear them, myself," Alice says, coming back with a spring, and leaning over the mother with such a joyful uncalled-for confusion in her manner, that Mrs. Kane thinks Alice is determined to think nothing but good of Rob's pretty, silly,

fair-haired sister. "I don't wear them myself, because —because I've been taught better."

"Then the ladies don't wear them in Exeter, Alice?"

Alice Kane nods her head and smiles again, and puzzles her mother by saying, "Yes, they do."

"Then Mrs. Lovell—a true lady—didn't like them?"

"Mrs, Lovell! dear mother, Mrs. Lovell wears them herself."

"And she has the charge of young girls. Well! well! and she spoils the form Heaven gave her. I never thought it of her, Alice."

There is very little more said about Mrs. Lovell or the atrocities of fashion this night, this first happy night of Alice's return home to lift the burden from her dear old mother's shoulders. Alice, the future manager, has to be made acquainted with a variety of domestic details that are new to her, farmer's daughter as she is. For Alice has been away from the house on the edge of the moor for ten years, and she is only twenty-two now. For six years she was a pupil at a good school in Exeter, and for the last five years she has been a governess in another and equally good establishment, in the same city; but she takes to the idea of all the duties that are to devolve upon her with delightful spirit, with refreshing eagerness.

"I always made the butter myself until that trouble came upon me, three months ago," Mrs. Kane says. "Jane is willing, but there's less than there ought to be now."

"And I'll always make the butter now, mother; at least, when I've learnt to make it."

"And old Baxter doesn't do with the land what your poor father did, or what I've done."

"I'll make Rob teach me what is to be done, and how it is to be done."

"Ah!" Mrs Kane says, with a deep sigh of satisfaction, "if you have Robert's help, dear, all will be well."

"And, of course, I shall have his help," Alice an-

swers, her head going up in slight surprise ; "he'd fly to help you, or me, or Jane—or anybody else for the matter of that; it's Rob's one fault, to be stupidly good-natured."

The old homestead beautifies itself soon under Alice's auspices. The girl has saved money from her earnings, and with it she buys another cow and new farm implements, and hires the services of an able, honest man, who owes allegiance to Robert Ford, and, therefore, does not attempt to defraud the young lady, after whose interest all men know Robert Ford will look sharply. Mrs. Kane's heart grows lighter day by day as she witnesses, and Jane testifies to, the general improvement. Nothing beautifies a house more than the heart of the head of it being light.

They are twelve miles from Barnstaple. They are six miles from their nearest neighbour, but Alice never seems dull. It had been a woeful grief to the mother when first she had been compelled to send for Alice, to think of the solitude into which her child would be plunged in this remote home of hers. But it is a grief to her no longer. Alice Kane is as free from care as the sky above or the breeze that blows over the moor on this sunny cloudless day.

Light of heart, light of foot, full of rich young health, full, too (but this her mother does not know), of a full, rich young hope, the young girl goes briskly through the round of her duties, and is never tired by them.

A deliciously invigorating healthy life it is out here on the edge of the moor. She daily gains a sense of greater freedom, a feeling of greater power, a firmer belief in her own ability to go on doing her best, and doing it successfully.

Robert Ford, who has been the slave of his love for her, and of his belief that eventually he shall have the courage to tell her of it in so many words, from the day she was eight years old, comes to see "how they're getting on" frequently. He is the nearest

neighbour; but six miles is a very short distance when no one lives nearer to you.

He comes in early one day, just as Jane is about to start for the market. Alice is full of justifiable pride. She is sending more pounds of butter, more eggs, more poultry away for sale than have been sent for five years from that farm.

He is a well-built, broad-shouldered young man, with yellow hair, like his sister Dorothy's. He does not wear his hair in a haystack, but has it closely cropped all over his head. It is curly and rebellious, though. And so, whenever he comes to see his idol, he puts on it "oil enough to mix a salad with," as the idol thinks a little disdainfully.

His blue eyes are very wide open—the very homes of candour and simplicity—simplicity untainted by any shade of folly or weakness, be it understood. Unluckily for himself they always open wider, and let out all their secrets, when they rest on Alice.

But she has not cared to find out the secrets yet. To her, Robert is a sort of human Newfoundland—a faithful, honest, strong fellow, who would be pleased to pull her, or anybody else, out, if she, or anybody else, got into the waters of difficulty. Her heart was too full of an idol she had erected at Exeter for her to respond to the heart whose idolatry he was lavishing on her. Respond to it, indeed! Purblind Alice did not yet realise that it was lavished upon *her*.

He has not arrayed himself in all his bravery, believing, as the Laird o' Cockpen did, that no woman could resist that, even if she could him. He has simply put on his thoroughly good, and excessively ill-made, light-grey clothes, because it is a way of showing homage to this lady whom he loves. He would do anything for her. And her mother knows it, and loves him for his devotion to her Alice, and, practically, asks him to dinner.

"Do stay, Rob," Alice says carelessly; "Jane is gone to market, and you'll see me making a pie and

peeling the potatoes; it won't be amusing to you, but it will be better than riding home under the mid-day sun."

He takes up a knife in his excess of happiness and is ready to peel a pie or make a potatoe, or do anything else that is vague and impossible. Alice, in her wonderful dress, that is not a bit like Dolly's, and that still does not look old-fashioned, steps about lightly, does her work, and forgets him.

Presently—he is standing close by the end of her table—he speaks.

"Alice!"

"Oh, Rob! I thought—I thought you had gone out with mother," she says, looking round, and missing the old lady. "I'm glad you didn't," she adds, politely, "I like to have some one to talk to while I'm making a pie!"

He sees that the girl is less collected, less careless, less absolutely in possession of herself than she ordinarily is. Nevertheless, being a man in love, he is unwary enough to proceed:

"Alice!" his face grows red through the sun-brown on it, and his blue eyes become hopelessly confiding, "Alice! you know why I come here, don't you?"

She stops and looks at him with a kindly air of interest. She has such sweet thoughts of her own, that it is by an effort only that she can compel herself to try to take in the meaning of what he is saying. Resting the rolling-pin on one end, and balancing her hand on the other, she looks at him thoughtfully, and fears, pitifully, that he is in some trouble about Dolly.

As she looks at him, in her perfect unconsciousness, the red dies out of his face and the light goes out of his hope.

"I see you don't," he says energetically. "You've taken my love and never seen it even."

She is very sorry, little as she says: for it is such a surprise to her that she can't say much. He feels that

she is very sorry, but that does not take the sting out of his pain. Like a man, he wants to get himself away directly; and, like a woman, she, in her cruel kindness, can't bear that he should ride away in that sun.

"We were children together," she reminds him; "if you were to get a stroke I should never forgive myself."

"I've had my stroke already, this morning," he says, with a ghastly effort to be sprightly.

"Nonsense—nonsense—if we had only been like cousins it would have been different; but we've been like brother and sister. You'll go away and see some stranger, and adore——"

"As you have done," he interrupts her gently; but it is her turn to be red in the face and awkward in manner now.

After awhile they go out together to look for Mrs. Kane. They meet her coming from the hen-house with her apron full of eggs. Seeing them together, she is quite ready to drop the eggs and bless them, but something in the expression of Robert's face deters her.

For the first time in her life she is angry with Alice. Robert is a rich man, as riches go in this class in this part of the world; and a good man as goodness goes in any part of it. She is not the type of mother who thinks that her daughter ought to think herself very well off to get a husband at all; but she does think that the like of Robert Ford will not come by again in a hurry.

It is rather a dull dinner of which these three partake presently. Robert Ford is not angry with Alice, but he is angry with himself for having clouded Alice's brow and Alice's heart, even for an hour. When she speaks to him, as she does constantly and kindly, something in his throat makes his eyes water sympathetically, and then he hates himself for his weakness; for Alice, at the sight of it, evidently has an extra twinge of pain.

When he is going to ride away, in the cool of the evening—he had planned for this whole holiday for more than a fortnight—Alice stands by, patting his roan horse's neck, and bidding him gentle good-bye. She is dreadfully inclined to apologise to him, but the saving remembrance that the mistake was caused by no fault of hers steps in, and she compromises matters, between her tenderness and sense of justice, by saying:

"Rob, you'll soon come again, won't you?"

"Why? You don't want me, Alice?"

"Mother will miss you so much," she pleads; "and it won't seem like home without you and Dolly coming in and out."

"And, by-and-by, I shall find some one else here; that will be it, you know, Alice," he adds, as her face grows sunny with a happiness she would hide if she could; "and when that happens——"

"How can we tell what may happen?" she interrupts sententiously.

"I shall have all the pain to go over again, but I'll come. God bless you, Alice." He gives her hand the truest clasp it will ever have from a man. And as he rides away she looks after him, and thinks how true he is, and how good, and what a pity it is he doesn't go about more and see other girls."

"So that's settled, Alice," her mother says, as Alice goes back slowly into the room.

Alice goes up and stands close to her mother, but behind her.

"I wish you could have cared for the lad," Mrs Kane says softly. And then Alice puts her head down on her mother's shoulders, and says:

"Mother, I must tell you now. I care too much for another lad to marry poor Rob."

Mrs. Kane is all eagerness for information; Alice the soul of candour in imparting it. But, after all, there is little to tell.

It is only another edition of the old, old story.

The outspoken lover has a rival in an unspoken one. Alice has given her heart away, after the improvident habit of young women, before it has been asked for in so many words.

The girl does not go into ecstacies in describing him, but in spite of this reticence the mother sees that this Mr. Guy Wyse is the hero of Alice's heart.

"He is an artist——"

"Then it's he who taught you better about dress," Mrs. Kane guesses shrewdly.

"Yes, about dress and everything." Then all the story of how they met comes out. Mr. Wyse was making a brief stay in Exeter, where, at an evening party, he met Mrs. Lovell, Alice, and some of the pupils. He was struck with Alice's beauty at once. He made acquaintance with Mrs. Lovell, he called, he ingratiated himself with everybody, he gave some of the girls drawing lessons—he made studies of Alice, he showed her mutely how he loved her, and things were at this stage when Alice was recalled home.

She tells her mother all this; and then there is a long pause; at last Mrs. Kane says: "He has had time to come after you, Alice."

Then Alice grows scarlet, crimson, white, in rapid succession, and confesses:

"When we said good-bye he told me he should come to see me in two months, and asked would I promise him a welcome. I promised him one; the two months are not over yet, mother."

"And that's all?"

"That's all; but it's enough; he will come, mother."

"I wish it had been Rob that you had known the best and worst of," Mrs. Kane sighs; but Alice laughs and says:

"We shall soon know the best and worst of Guy, mother; he'll soon come."

Her words seemed to be prophetic. The day after a letter reaches her from Guy Wyse. A buoyant letter, full of pleasure at the thought of seeing her so soon.

He is going to stay at Westward Ho! whence he imagines he can easily run over, as he believes the farm is somewhere near Barnstaple. Will she mind writing to him, and giving him the route? He addresses her as his "dearest friend," and signs himself, "hers ever and always," and she believes him.

From the moment she answers his letter Alice grows a little better. She bounds through the round of her duties more rapidly than ever, it seems, and then gets out on the free, fragrant moor, that is still covered with heath. Some of the purple flowers have turned brown and yellow, but still, faded as they are, they make glorious patches of colour. He does not know the moor yet! How he will love its wild beauty!

She longs to see the place to which he is coming. Though she has been born and bred in this place, she has never seen far-famed Westward Ho! Mother has never see it either. She coaxes and persuades, and they make a pilgrmage thither to see the place to which the "Happy Prince with Joyful Eyes" is coming.

There is nothing unmaidenly about Alice Kane. If she did not know that Guy would not be there for another week she would not go near Westward Ho! As it is, she sighs to see the place where he will be living during the happy days of authorised courtship that are coming—that she feels so sure are coming.

The market-cart is made comfortable with rugs and cushions for Mrs. Kane, and Alice takes the reins, and they spend three hours of a lovely autumn day in driving over the lonely rugged road to Barnstaple. On the way they meet Robert Ford, and it transpires that he has never been to Westward Ho! "And all North Devon men ought to know it, or be ashamed to think of Charles Kingsley!" Alice says with enthusiasm. Then she adds, "Come, Rob," and he comes.

Being next to her he feels that he is steaming through Paradise as they go by train from Barnstaple to Instow. Alice feels that she is in Paradise too—but

not because she is next to Rob. Mrs. Kane likes the present aspect of things too well to worry herself about the future. This is the first holiday she has had for years. It will be grand to see the spot about which such a book has been written!

At Instow the two young people find a fairy boat and boatman ready to waft them over the stream to Appledore, where a glorified pony-carriage is procured to take them through Northam to Westward Ho!

This (to her) abrupt transition from the isolation of her dear old home on the moor, to the life and excitement of pony-carriage-driving down the road, and avenues running up from it to lovely mansions before which peacocks and ladies are walking, is bewildering to Mrs. Kane. She likes it, but it makes her sleepy. She closes her eyes, and Alice and Rob are presently as much alone as if the mother were back at the farmhouse.

"There's a reason for this, isn't there, Alice? 'tisn't only a holiday," Rob says softly.

Alice turns her face towards him frankly. Slightly shaded as it is by the sailor's hat he sees it in all its radiance.

"There is a reason, Rob; I do want to see Westward Ho!"

"Some one you love has been there?"

"Some one I love is coming," she murmurs, and she is half-proud, and half-ashamed.

Bob is only a miller; his grammar is often defective; his pronunciation is always so; but he is a very knight of purity. The fear that Alice's lover may be there already never crosses his mind for a moment.

So they go on and on till they meet that other fresh breeze which is so different to the wind that blows over the moorland—the breeze that comes over the sea.

They get down to the hotel presently, and find it full of life, and the savour that greets them reminds

them that they are very hungry. So they have dinner, and then Mrs. Kane goes to sleep, and Alice and Rob go out for a walk.

The pebble ridge is a marvel, but a fatiguing one to surmount. They soon have enough of that. They get out on the Northam Burrows, where several detached parties are out playing golf. If you do not happen to have your head cracked by a ball winging its elegant way in utter obliviousness of your existence this is a delightful game to witness. Alice has never seen it before, and so flings herself into the spirit of it as she watches, and thinks what pretty pictures Guy will make of some of these pretty girls by-and-bye.

They stroll about for an hour. Rob refrains from making love, and Alice is very happy in the thought that the next time she comes here it will probably be with Guy, as his bride perhaps. They will spend a good deal of time in the old home, of course, and when they are away she will leave a pair of paragons to look after the farm and her mother. Then she remembers Rob, and asks a little timidly:

"Have you ever been to London, Rob?"

Robert shakes his head. He never has been. To the best of his belief he never shall go, now.

"Not if I ever live there, Rob?" (You cat without design, playing your hapless mouse so unconsciously). "Surely, if I ever live there, Rob, you'll come to see me."

Rob is about to answer plaintively, but a golf-ball whizzes by, and he is compelled to perform a leap in the air to avoid it. Instead of being plaintive, when he comes down he is penitential.

"Let us get away from here, Alice; there is some wild playing going on with those two over there."

"Which two?" Alice asks, and Rob indicates a Dolly Varden dress, and a shooting-costume in the distance. That is all Alice can see. So she laughs, and says:

"A bridegroom and his bride, I should say. Blind

to everybody else, they may knock one's head off, as you say."

"You were saying," he begins, as they turn to walk back to the hotel, "that if you ever lived in London you'd like to see me. Is it there you're to live, Alice?"

"I don't know—I know nothing, Rob. Can't you understand that I feel sure without knowing."

Yes; he can understand. He can understand only too well. The understanding stabs him with pain, but he bears it like a man, and answers:

"I suppose he's very different to all we down here?"

Alice thrills to the tone of misery. Keenly alive as she is to the difference between her handsome, refined smooth-spoken lover, and this rough diamond by her side, she will not point it.

"He is like you in one thing, Rob; he is very true and good," she says in a low voice. Then she adds, with an effort, "You must not take it all for granted yet—it may be a long time yet. Didn't I tell you I felt sure without knowing—he and I are both so young."

The exigences of golf have brought the Dolly Varden dress and the shooting-costume right into the path they must cross to get back to the hotel. Alice and Rob are sauntering on in chat that is pleasant and confidential to the one, agonising and tantalising to the other. They are a handsome, striking pair; and the little lady in the Dolly Varden dress points them out to her companion with an admiring laugh.

"Look there, dear! Are they like ourselves, I wonder!"

He looks! The handsome pair are near to them now; and Alice is standing still, with a whiteness spreading over her beautiful face.

"By Jove! it is—it *is*!" The gentleman in the shooting-costume tries his hardest to be easy. "It *is* Alice Kane. My dear old friend, let me introduce you to my wife, Mrs. Guy Wyse." Then, as Alice re-

covers her breath and her colour, he adds: "I didn't tell you I should bring a companion with me to Westward Ho! I meant this as a surprise."

"It is a surprise!" Alice says simply, as she shakes hands cordially with the golden-haired bride.

Mr. Guy Wyse has more than a slight idea of how things really are with Alice. He has done his best to make them what they are; and if it had not been for a sudden fancy for this pretty creature by his side—seen for the first time since he parted with Alice—all would have ended as Alice had a right to expect. He is a very slender, refined-looking, handsome young man. He is not naturally heartless, and he would like now to call Alice "a poor little thing, and hope she'd be happy with that stalwart young fellow." But Alice is half an inch taller than himself, and feeling that half inch keenly, he feels that he can't call her a "poor little thing."

Mrs. Kane wakes up presently, and hears that it is time to be going home. She tells Alice that she knows she (Alice) is overtired.

Alice's answer is brief:

"Guy Wyse is here with his wife, mother; don't say anything."

"May I say I'm glad for Robert's sake?"

Alice shakes her head.

"He *is* so grieved; don't be glad that he has my sorrow as well as his own to think of now; that is the only difference it will make to him, mother."

They go back, in the chill autumn night air, that does not make one of them think of Paradise, to the old home on the edge of the moor.

And there we leave Alice.

WITH THE BLOOM OFF.

A SUGGESTION.

CHAPTER I.

"THE poetry of life is over, and its prose begins from to-day," my husband of a month's standing says to me, quite cheerfully, as we enter the home in which we are to begin our married life.

In the innermost recesses of my heart I feel rather disposed to cavil at this statement. Ours has been a marriage of affection. Our courtship has been, he has often declared, "a poem!" According to my idea, the romance of life is just beginning for us. But I content myself with thinking this, for Archie does not like me to contravert his opinions.

At starting, I will confess that I am somewhat of the order which the Scotch denominate feckless; that is to say, I am not wilfully extravagant in taste or expenditure. Nevertheless money always goes from me quickly; and when it and I are parted, all the account I can offer of the separation is:

> Alas! I know not how it went,
> I knew not it was going.

Neither am I untidy exactly; still, small articles of various kinds, that are necessary to my every-day existence, have a habit of mislaying themselves, and of being found, after long and weary search, in places that have no manner of congruity with them. Further, I am not wanting in energy of a certain sort, as the circumstances of my life will show; for I have supported myself by writing incessantly ever since I was eighteen, and I can follow the hounds, without even thinking of fatigue, from morning till night. But I grow languid whenever I am dull or bored, and I can never exert myself to scold a servant. However, dear Archie knew and admired these characteristics of mine before we married; and though the chaos that reigned in my trunks exercised his spirit sometimes when we were travelling, the sole reproof he offered was to put them neat for me—and that was a form of reproof that I rather liked. But in spite of this gentle experience, my heart sinks a little as Archie's inauguration speech falls upon my ears.

"I must go into harness regularly to-morrow," he says, as he looks at the mass of correspondence that has accumulated during his absence. "We must breakfast invariably at half-past eight, you know. I walk up to my office to keep myself in health, and to save 'bus fares. By-the-way, Kitty dear, what system did you pursue in your housekeeping before you married? Everything was always excessively nice; it was one of the things that impressed me favourably with you from the first. You were always exquisitely dressed, and your ménage was perfect."

"Mamma managed everything while she could," I stammered, "and when she died—well, things went on, you know."

"That is to say you took the reins into your own hands," he says, admiringly. "I've always contended that a literary woman can, if she pleases, superintend every domestic detail, just as though she didn't spend seven or eight hours a day in writing, and now my own

wife proves to me that my theory is correct. Do you pay ready money for everything, or run weekly bills?"

I try to think, in order that I may make him a clear and satisfactory statement. This is all I can recall as to my past manner of managing money matters: "I gave money to the servants when they wanted it," I say, "and they spent it, of course, to the best advantage."

"You checked the books, Kitty?" he says gravely.

"Looked at them, do you mean, to see how many loaves of bread, and pints of milk, and pounds of meat we had had for the last three months? No, no, Archie! If I had done that—other women declare that it takes all their time to keep house properly—when should I have written, and made the money by which we lived?"

"If you had a proper sense of order (which you can easily acquire) you would see to all your household affairs early in the morning, and get to your writing afterwards; it's merely a matter of method."

"Then I should go to my work tired," I say.

"Nonsense! Looking after their houses doesn't tire other women."

"Do the other women you speak of go and write novels?" I ask speciously, and a light scowl settles on my husband's brow, as he answers:

"You always had time for riding, and dancing; and, permit me to observe, that you wasted a great deal of it in making yourself generally agreeable."

"The riding gave me health and strength for my work," I argue; "the dancing gave me pleasure; and the making myself agreeable was a social obligation."

"Well, you'll have to be careful, and economical, and to look after things yourself," he says, quietly. Then he proceeds to wonder why a cousin of mine, who has superintended the preparations for our welcome home, has committed the enormity of suffering wax candles to be placed in the bedroom candlesticks. As I listen to him I quite agree with him—the poetry

of life is over, and the reading of rather a severe piece of prose has commenced.

This cousin, Marian Latrobe, has been a favourite friend of mine, during nearly all the days of my unmarried life. She will be a pleasant element in our home, I tell myself; for Archie is away nearly all day, and when I leave my desk, at one o'clock, I like to have some one with whom to saunter from room to room, some one to help me to water the flowers, and to speak to about the news of the day. She is bright, lively, good-looking, and not one of those tiresome girls, who affect to believe that newly married people always wish to be alone. I felt, when I invited her to be our guest immediately on our return, that I should be pleasing Archie as well as myself. It troubles me slightly, therefore, when Archie girds against those candles. It seems very ungrateful to Marian, after all the trouble she has taken.

But somehow or other it is borne in upon me, when we have been home two or three weeks, that Archie is getting tired of something in his new life, with which he does not exactly like to find fault, but which does not exactly please him nevertheless. "Can it be with me?" I question for an idle moment; and, little vain as I am, I do not distrust the answer my heart gives: it is not with me.

"Don't Marian's people begin to want her home again?" Archie says to me one morning, walking in from his dressing-room, and affecting to be deeply occupied in contemplating his own face in my glass.

"Want her home! I hope not yet," I reply, quickly. "What should I do without her while you're away? Besides, she saves me a lot of trouble—she sees that I have luncheon, and orders dinner, and——"

"Takes a confounded lot of liberties altogether," he interrupts, testily. "The truth is, Kitty, I am tired of seeing the girl at every turn of my home life; she's as much mistress of the house as you are, and I don't like it."

He wheels round from the glass as he speaks, and unmistakably he does "not like it." I shiver with the presentiment that the evil days are coming upon me—that I am going to be found fault with by one against whose fault-finding I shall have no appeal. I gulp down the sob that rises in my throat at the recollection of the life-long impunity from blame, of the lightest order, which I have enjoyed. I stifle the regret that strives to make itself felt for my lost liberty. I remind myself of the vows I have so recently made to honour and obey him; and, though I don't feel in the least inclined to do the latter, I say quite cheerfully,—

"As you will, Archie; I'll give Marian the slightest hint in the world to go, and she will be sure to take it. She has such tact—we Latrobes are famous for it, in fact. So that question's settled, isn't it?"

"You are a sweet-tempered darling!" he says, admiringly; and I refrain from telling him that my amiable acquiescence, on this occasion, proceeds quite as much from my dislike to having a crumple in my own rose-leaf, as from my desire to please him. The fact is, we Latrobes have another strongly-marked characteristic—we are willing to fight to the death when action is forced upon us, but we are strongly averse from anything like petty warfare, and from aught that partakes of the nature of fuss to any degree.

My first domestic difficulty disturbs me considerably for awhile. Archie goes away to his office in a most balmy mood; but Marian remains with me—to be told, before he comes home to dinner, that she is not wanted here any more! The task that is before me is a hateful one. Fond as I am of my husband, I allow myself to think him inconsiderate—to say nothing more—and I give a very affectionate back-thought to those days when I reigned, and reigned alone, in the pretty home, the comforts of which all the friends I was fond of were free to enjoy, as much as I did myself.

Marian is especially fascinating to me to-day. Un-

consciously she makes herself more agreeable—I may say more necessary—to me than she has ever been before. She goes out early, and buys a lot of flowers and ferns for me to arrange when I leave off writing. She recalls to her memory a wonderful way of dressing artichokes which she learnt in France, and which she thinks Archie will like. She discovers, in one of the daily papers, an excellent review of a recently-published novel of mine. She turns an unpleasant structure, that my milliner has just sent home, into a graceful and charming bonnet. And when she has done all these things, the time is ripe for me to tell her that we are tired of her, and inhospitably anxious for her departure!

She comes into my room, where I am dressing for dinner, and momentarily expecting Archie's return. This has always been a habit of hers, and I have encouraged it; for we amuse each other, and she likes to wait upon me in trifles, and I like to be waited upon in everything. It occurs to me now, for the first time, that perhaps this habit may not have been quite so pleasing to Archie; for it closes the door between his room and mine, and prevents his seeing me, as a rule, till we all three sit down to dinner. But I cannot change this custom now, and so I say,—

"I have been Mrs. Tyrrell a long time now, yet every now and then I feel just as if I were Kitty Latrobe still."

"Do you really now?" Marian rejoins. "I rather wonder at that; Archie is a very nice fellow, but I don't think that he ever forgets, for a moment, that you're Mrs. Tyrrell, and not Kitty Latrobe still."

"He's desperately fond of me," I say, rapidly. "He's never so happy as when he is with me——"

"Alone!" she interrupts, laughing. "That's just it, Kitty dear. Don't distress yourself about what I am going to say. Archie didn't marry us both, you know, and I see that, sometimes when he comes down to dinner, he is so perplexed as to which is his wife,

that he finds it very difficult to be barely civil to either of us. I don't think that I shall stand upon the order of my going, but I shall go in a day or two. You very seldom take a horse on the curb yourself, do you, Kitty?"

"I don't think I would take even a donkey on the curb," I laugh; and she shrugs her pretty shoulders, and says, as she saunters from the room,—

"Let us hope Archie has a light hand, for he is going to take you on the curb pretty sharply—I see that plainly enough, Kitty; however, I say nothing." And having said enough to make me unhappy, Marian leaves me to my own reflections until Archie comes in to dress.

Knowing that I have, at the cost of a considerable amount of embarrassment to myself, solved the difficulty of Marian's departure for him, I am a little disappointed at the air of vexation and annoyance which surrounds him like an atmosphere. To the shame of my selfishness be it said, that my own home trouble is so paramount with me, that I cannot put it in the background and silently sympathise with my husband. I am so full of the subject of Marian's surrender of her own position—to say nothing of her satire on mine—that I am utterly incapable of making the attempt to "soothe him with my finer fancies." On the contrary, I bunglingly cause my own grievances to advance with the words—

"Just stay and hear about Marian, Archie; it has been so disagreeable to settle it; but it is all settled, and she is going in a day or two."

"Oh, never mind about Marian!" he says, wearily. "I have more important things to think about."

"You made rather a point of her visit coming to an end very soon, this morning," I say, rather pettishly, "and now that I have had the mortification of my cousin seeing that I am not quite mistress of my own house, you seem to think it a trivial affair altogether. You are inconsistent, Archie!"

"That girl is a positive nuisance!" Archie says, irritably turning away into his own dressing-room; and I go down and rejoin Marian in the drawing-room, with a feeling of disgust and chagrin reigning in my heart.

We are very calm and peaceful for a few weeks after Marian's departure; for my husband perceives that I am making strenuous efforts to do the whole duty of woman as housewife. I institute a set of admirable rules and regulations respecting the working of the house. On fine mornings I make a little round among our tradespeople, and succeed in saving about fourpence on the butcher's weekly bill. This feat of valour and skill—for it has required a vast outlay of both qualities—elevates me in my own opinion prodigiously, and I begin to nourish the feeling that we shall live very comfortably on the income I save by my personal supervision. Not having a strong physique, I find, when I have fulfilled these matutinal obligations, that I am utterly incapable of making any mental effort. It is in vain that I spread the virgin page before me, and take the hitherto facile pen in my hand. The page remains white and unwritten still, the pen refuses to run; and at the end of a few weeks—when Archie asks me what money is due to me for fugitive work—I have to tell him that there is nothing due to me, for that I "have been unable to concentrate myself sufficiently lately, to do even fugitive work." In fact, I have proved myself a very good housekeeper to him, but I have also proved to myself that I lack the power to give my imagination fair play, while I am in the midst of the performance of laboriously prosaic details.

Time passes, and we seem to prosper; for I am working again in my own groove, and leaving my household to partake freely of the delights of that liberty which is so dear to the heart of the British domestic, and which is so sure to degenerate into license when it is unchecked by the eye and hand of

the mistress. We seem to prosper, but I know that the prosperity is a sham, built upon a system of such deceit as I should have scorned in the old days, before my unhappy habit of averting the present evil had grown into the strong, cowardly determination to keep a fair surface seeming at any price. I know that we are living beyond our means. I know that my health is failing —partly from physical cares, and partly from the state of tension in which my nerves are kept. I know that the day of reckoning must come; and there are times when I lay my weary head on the pillow, and pray, either that I may be made good enough to die and die at once, or that I may be given grace to face the future, and make a clean breast of the course of folly which my husband has frightened me into pursuing.

For it has come to this—Archie is good, kind, clever, and dearly devoted to me; but he does not understand that a certain habit he has of diving into details—of pettily interfering in petty things, and of complaining about trifles that a man ought never to see—is corroding my life away, and alienating my confidence in him. I shrink so pitiably from the sight of the well-known scowl, from the sound of the carping, petulant complaint, when the question of our exchequer is raised, that I pile up misery for myself in the future by selling out portions of my small capital unknown to Archie, wherewith to relieve our necessities in the present. But though the money is essentially my own—though I have worked for it, and shall work even harder to replace it—I feel as if a brand of guilt were on my brow, as it slips through my fingers in liquidation of the debts we have mutually incurred.

By the time matters have come to this climax, little children are springing up around me, making fertile what would otherwise be the desert of my life. These involve a new set of cares and responsibilities, of exercises in self-abnegation, and futile endeavours to make

the already overstrained two ends meet. By this time, also, our families on either side have ebbed away from us considerably. Archie's people "have no patience" with me, for not reduplicating again and again an unexpected success which I once made, and which was the cause of my putting money in my purse to a considerable extent. And my people, with equal injustice, have no patience with Archie, because he is not jerked into a good and remunerative position out of the official course.

Meantime the cost of living is increasing daily. Rent is going up in every part of town in which sanitary considerations will permit one to dwell. Things that were necessaries when we married are regarded as luxuries by us now, because of our utter inability to obtain them. The butcher's bill is becoming a burden greater than I can bear. The name of rent-day is as the crack of doom to us. We despondently ask one another "how we are to live?" and not even echo answers us satisfactorily. With a brain warped by the perpetual endeavours to "calculate" our expenses down, with a mind cramped by dwelling under a weight of monetary trouble which it is powerless to uplift, I still ply my pen incessantly in vain attempt to supply the incessant needs. At this juncture a solution of the heavier difficulties of the situation is offered for our consideration—a social system for the future which, if it proves practicable, will, at the cost of the sacrifice of a trifling selfish independence, do much towards restoring the financial position of all such temporarily embarrassed families as like to try the plan, and make the trifling sacrifice.

A friend with a wife and the same number of children as we have, comes to us one day, and proposes that we take a house, servants and governess together—that we exactly divide household expenses—and, in short, try whether two kings cannot reign satisfactorily in Brentford.

The plan has a foreign odour about it, which is a

rank offence to the majority of our friends when they hear of it. Nevertheless it appeals to us; we resolve upon making the experiment: and how it succeeds shall be told very shortly.

CHAPTER II.

THE preliminaries of beginning life afresh economically with the Bertrams, are rather more costly than an indulgence in all our own most extravagant ideas during the last few years would have been. Mr. Bertram is in the same branch of the Civil Service as Archie, but his salary is much higher, and his tastes are altogether more florid than Archie's. The latter's never very expensive notions about beautifying life have become narrowed by a train of unfortunate circumstances. He has got into the habit of paring life of everything pretty, of abolishing everything that embellishes it. But now, under the new co-operative order of things, Archie launches out in company with the bolder spirit in a way that astonishes me.

We begin to economise by taking a very much larger house than the one we have hitherto occupied, in a better neighbourhood, and at a higher rent. This last item, we all four observe to each other, is utterly unimportant, for are we not to divide the rent between us? And would it not be too sharp an ordeal to put ourselves to, were we to commence the harmonious arrangement, in a house in which we should be everlastingly infesting each other's footsteps? The house is "cheap, too, after all, being what it is—very spacious and most imposing in appearance." Accordingly we take it, at the comparatively low rent, move our respective household goods and families into it, and then discover that it must be repapered, painted, and varnished from garret to basement.

"It will look at least a hundred a year better, and the expense will be a mere nothing—between us," Mr. Bertram says enthusiastically. "We'll choose papers that will harmonise our furniture, and take off that look of our things having been pitchforked together without the exercise of much taste."

I back out of taking any part in these debates, as a rule, but when it comes to a question of papers I feel that I must speak.

"Let them be Morris's," I plead, humbly. "All those French papers are so many blows in the eye, after getting used to the early English style."

The truth is, I have only "got used" to the early English style in theory yet. But I think of my old china, and Venetian glass, and Chippendale chairs; and so I strike a blow for the only papers that can do justice to their charms.

The papers are got, and hung; and we stand in our empty rooms and regard them admiringly, and feel how well our furniture—now relegated to various cellars and out-houses—will look when replaced and re-arranged. But the feeling of perfect satisfaction is of brief duration. It strikes us all that, if we would not have a look of incongruity prevail, we must have early English chintzes to accord with those eye-refreshing papers. And by the time the chintzes are procured it is felt that it would be an insult to them to associate them with those modern abominations, walnut-wood, curly-legged chairs.

It is a pleasant sight to see the house, that had been so glaringly modern, becoming mediævalised under our joint auspices; only the process is not altogether pleasant. It is the hottest season of the year, and the season is the hottest that has been known for many years. Under these circumstances the odours of paint and varnish, intensified as they are by the heat, become almost unbearable. To the great gratification of the other lady member of the firm and myself, these are the few isolated weeks of the year in which our respective

husbands can get away for their grindingly-earned holiday. They go; and we remain behind in the home of paint and chaos, for the system of economy forbids that the various sets of workmen—who are employed in making us exquisitely uncomfortable in the present, in order that we may be dazzlingly beautiful in the future—shall be left to their own devices unsupervised. Accordingly we remain in the disordered house in broiling London, and I enjoy it because of the novelty, and she enjoys it because she has the executive power—the one so rare in woman—and things seem to be setting themselves in order in a most hopeful way.

Presently unexpected and not to be disregarded duty calls Mrs. Bertram away, and I, the least able of the quadrilateral, am left in sole charge.

I receive the countless directions which are given to me, in the sweet spirit, which is born of the knowledge that I am utterly incompetent to carry one of them out in a satisfactory manner. I am to "take the time," each day, of the job-workmen who come in at odd hours to do different things! I picture myself spending weary hours with a note-book and pencil in my hand, wondering when they came, and wishing they would go, and being in a hopeless fog altogether about the business. My brain reels as I look at the list of the superfluous decorative articles that have to be returned, and at the other list of the absolutely needed articles that must be procured, without delay, from far-distant corners of our not too compact metropolis. I long for a shady corner in the house, to which to retire, and "think out" my difficulties, and there is not one left. The curtains and blinds are not fixed yet; the sun has it all his own way; and, altogether, there are times when I feel that this is a perfect slough of despond, through which I am walking into the paradise of future experimental peace and comfort.

But the temporary feeling of despair vanishes, as do other unwholesome mists, before the bright shining sun of conscience, which nurtures the innate knowledge

we all have of its being both wise and well, both our duty and our pleasure, to bring our own individual wills and wishes into subjection, very often to the wills and wishes of the other members of the confraternity. To me there is no merit in resigning the shadow of authority. I am devoid of household ambition. If the effect is pretty, graceful and pleasant, I am thoroughly well content that some one else should cause it to be so. Mrs. Bertram, on the contrary, feels actual pleasure in actively conducing to the success of our schemes. We were both of us sufficiently in possession of our senses, when contemplating the untried position, to be aware that there could not be two nominal mistresses in the house. She shrank from neither the trouble nor the responsibility. I did from both. The result is that we supplement each other well, for her unselfish acceptance of the post of manager-in-general leaves me quite at liberty to pursue my own avocations, untroubled by the thought that the weekly books are still unchecked, and unharassed by the consideration that cook will come to me presently for orders about a dinner of which I have not yet thought.

Granted that it is only women who can adjust their angles in this way—who could exist together under such a règime—surely there must be many pairs of such women endowed with our respective characteristics in every circle. The one must like household authority, the other must be utterly indifferent to it. Surely I am not singular in being this latter thing? As for our husbands, men are never petty in these matters; and they are proving that it is quite possible for two kings to reign at Brentford.

The great facts of such a system, if carried out, will be that two families live in this way in a better style than one can if living alone; that four young children receive a good education at half price; that one woman of our class out of every two will be left free to pursue some special art, or profession, or trade—for ladies of

high birth and position are going into trade in these days without any thought of degradation; and that a generous breadth, and a more tolerant and forbearing spirit, will be infused into many hitherto narrowed family circles. And all this without destroying privacy, for I am assuming that in all cases such shall be secured to each member of the united families, if it be deemed desirable.

WASTED.

"POLLY is a mere child, Mr. Staunton; wait till you see my sister Florence. I'll give you leave to admire her; but Polly! Give Polly a box of bon-bons if you like, but don't go engaging her for every round dance. I declare, if you do, I'll send Miss Polly back by the next train, and write to mamma to tuck her dresses, and relegate her to the nursery again.

"The speaker is Mrs. Saltoun, a beautiful young matron of three or four and twenty. The subject she is discussing with Mr. Staunton—the handsome, stiff, soldierly man opposite to her—is her sister Polly, a young girl of sixteen, fresh from the paternal country rectory, let loose from home for the first time.

Mr. Staunton laughs in a pleasant, half-embarrassed way; he is on very intimate terms with the beautiful young wife of his captain, and he does not mind her outspokenness, on the subject of his pronounced attentions to her sister, in the least. In spite of her threat to send Polly home if he will persist in dancing all the round dances with the child, he knows well

that in her heart Mrs. Saltoun is far from ill-pleased at the turn affairs are taking.

"Polly may be only a child, but she's a remarkably nice child, and refreshes a fellow who has had a dose of the designing girls of the period. Come, Mrs. Saltoun, you must let her dance with me. I am a safe fellow, you know; other fellows would be sure to try humbug on with such a charming little girl."

Mrs. Saltoun heaves a sigh of mock resignation. "Oh my responsibilities!" she says. "Here am I burdened with the care of Miss Polly's well-being now, and with three small daughters of my own growing up in the nursery as fast as they can. Better give her the bon-bons, Mr. Staunton, and not insist on my taking her to the ball to-night."

Mr. Staunton shakes his head at the proposition, which is made in jest with an under-current of earnestness in it.

"I do insist," he says in a friendly, half-peremptory tone; "where is Polly now?"

"Putting puzzles together," her sister tells him mischievously, "or playing cat's-cradle with my housemaid, and wasting that functionary's time; or seeing how she'd 'look with her hair turned up and a bonnet on.' My dear Leonard," Mrs. Saltoun goes on, with a sudden dash of earnestness, "let the child be a child still."

"You were engaged to Saltoun at sixteen?" he urges.

"Oh don't quote me!" she cries, with a laugh; it's all right with me, just because Phil is Phil. How he used to humour my sudden fancies and imaginary regrets! and how he looked after me, not leaving me to my own devices to pick up what friends and ideas I liked, as half you men do. Don't quote me; I am an exceptionably fortunate woman, and—you're not Phil."

She says these last words with a sudden solemnity that is foreign to her, and that causes him to look

grave and to remain silent. Then she remembers that, after all, Leonard Staunton has not proposed marriage to Polly, and also that, up to the present, Polly is quite innocent of the knowledge that he is specially singling her out. Remembering these things she says, with a swift return to her ordinary bright, gay manner:

"I believe I am going more than half way to meet trouble. You're rather fond of teasing, in your sober way, Leonard?"

"Well, put the question by for the time," he laughs. "What are your plans for the day? Are you going to hear the band?"

"I am going to ride; you may be my escort if you like."

"I shall be most happy," he says, slowly, with a lack of all flattering eagerness. Mrs. Saltoun is unaccustomed to have her gracious permission received in this way, and so she says, almost coldly:

"Don't feel yourself bound to go because I asked you——"

"Is Polly going?" he interrupts; and, at this plain betrayal of his feelings, Polly's sister cannot refrain anger against him, or refrain from laughing.

"No; Polly will remain at home, in her bed-room, trimming her first ball-dress all over with rosebuds—real ones, such beauties!"

"Extravagant Miss Polly; I know to my cost that rosebuds are of price."

"But they were sent to her; they are an offering from Mr. Carew."

"What! that red-throated, white-headed fellow, in the —th?"

"He is in the —th, but, as far as I can remember, he's not red-throated, and certainly he's not white-headed. What heresy to speak of his golden hair in that way."

"I don't think much of him," Staunton says; and

then, as there is no prospect of seeing Polly, he takes himself away.

"I daresay you don't think much of him," Mrs. Saltoun murmurs, thoughtfully; "but, for all that, he's a warm-hearted, nice boy, who would love Polly better than himself, which you never will."

Just at this moment the theme herself comes into the room—a light-footed, slender-shaped girl of sixteen, with a sweet, gay child's face, and a pleasant, unaffected child's manner. Lying in a thick fringe over her forehead, and hanging in wavy masses down her back, hair of a red golden hue make an aureole around her. She has her hands full of rosebuds. Carew has been very liberal; having used all she wants for her dress, she has brought these to her sister.

"You careless child, how you're holding them, heads and tails together," Mrs. Saltoun says. "Thanks! these are for me, are they? Have you decorated yourself sufficiently in your own estimation?"

"I shall be wreathed in them to-night, Belle," the girl replies. "I wish to-night were come. Oh, Belle, I shall be wretched if I have to sit out and watch other girls dancing, and don't get any myself!"

"Oh, some one is sure to be good-natured enough to ask you."

"Mr. Carew will, I am sure," Polly rejoins.

"And I've no doubt but that Mr. Staunton will, Polly; he has been here this morning."

"Has he?" Polly says with superb indifference.

"Yes; are you sorry I didn't send for you?" the married sister asks.

"Oh no, Belle, I couldn't have come," the child answers freely. "I was about my dress, you know. I do hope it will look long enough behind." And with this expression of earnest feeling she passes away from the subject of Mr. Staunton.

Half-an-hour after this, Mrs. Saltoun, riding away from her house, casts an upward glance at the drawing-room window, where Polly lounges, watching her.

The red golden hair is tangled, for she has been rolling on the floor with a puppy, and the bright child's face is dimpling all over with smiles that are evoked by nothing particular.

"Thank Heaven!" the young matron says, taking her horse away at a sharp trot, "Polly is a child still, with no thought of love or marriage in her head."

So thinking, she flings off all wearying thoughts of the responsibilities of her elder sisterhood. So thinking, she stays out many hours of that bright summer afternoon, enjoying her ride—stung by no consciousness of a violated charge—free from the oppressive influence of the knowledge that she will have to come to a definite conclusion soon.

She stays out, beguiled by the beauty of the day, so long, that when she reaches home, hot and tired, she finds that dinner will be ready in a quarter of an hour, and that Phil is already dressed for it. In her eyes Phil is faultless. In other people's eyes, Phil's mania for punctuality is deemed a trifle less than a virtue. However, whatever it may be, Mrs. Saltoun has a respect for the quality, and reaches the table just as her husband is beginning to be impatient.

She is so breathless with the rapidity of her movements during the last ten minutes, that she does not notice Polly until dinner is nearly over, and she has detailed to her husband every incident of her ride. Then she turns to her sister, and is about to offer the latter a donkey-ride on Blackheath, when something in the child's face stops her.

"What is it?" she ejaculates. "Polly!"

The red-gold hair fringes the brow and hangs in wavy masses down her back, just as it did in the morning. But the free, happy child's face, and bright, unaffected child's manner have changed. She has been roused from the enchanted sleep of childhood; but whether it has been by the kiss of the genuine fairy prince or not, remains to be seen.

"I've something to tell you, Belle," she says, with

a certain sort of tender outgoing of feeling towards her sister. And her lips quiver, and her eyes flicker and fill with tears in a way that makes Phil wonder "if the child has broken anything or not."

But his wife has no such dread as this on her mind, as she takes the young girl—a child no longer—back into the drawing-room, and asks, lovingly:

"Tell me, dear, is it Carew?"

And with choking sobs Polly stutters out: "No, Belle, no; it's Mr. Staunton."

"Has he been here?" Belle questions, indignantly.

"Yes, almost as soon as you left; and he has been so very, very kind, that I couldn't say No when he asked me if I would be his wife."

"Did you wish to say No?" the married sister asks, in an agony of spirit which she dares not quite reveal.

"No," Polly says, holding up a tear-stained face to be kissed. "I didn't want to say anything; I hadn't thought of him even till he came in and told me that he loved me very much, and that he'd like me to be his wife, that he might be able to take care of me; and then I remembered Aunt Helen and Aunt Grace, and how grim, and dull, and cross they always seem, and mamma says that's because they have no husbands to love and take care of them, and so I said Yes. Fancy my being married before Florence, Belle! She'll come and stay with us both now, and I shall take her to balls."

As this view of the glories of her future state beams upon her, Polly's face glows with gratified vanity, and all her tears are dried up at once. The tears threaten to spring again when Mrs. Saltoun says:

"It won't be all balls and smooth sailing, Polly dear: remember, you will have days and weeks alone with him very often. Do you love him well enough to stand that?"

"It will be better than being like Aunt Helen and Aunt Grace, anyway," Polly says. And Mrs. Saltoun says resignedly:

"Well, there's nothing for me to do but to write to papa and mamma. I suppose Leonard will say something about it to me to-night?"

"Yes, Belle, he's written by to-night's post to papa. And now, hadn't I better go and dress?"

Mr. Staunton's letter is received by the paternal power in due time, pronounced to be a most straightforward and admirable one; and Polly—when practical arrangements for her comfort and security in the future have been made—is delivered up by her well-satisfied parents to the care and protection of Mr. Staunton for life. They come back after the wedding-tour, and even the most critical observers are bound to confess that the hastily-devised and carried-out scheme seems to promise well for Polly's happiness. For a year she is a popular, pretty, much-sought young matron, living in a whirl of glittering garrison-town gaiety. And her husband is proud of her, and tolerant of things as they are. At the end of that time excitement begins to tell its tale in the flushed cheek and sharpened outline of the face. A heavy, feverish cold attacks her; and when she is recovering from the effects of this, her first child is born, and by-and-by, it is a very weak and emaciated Polly who comes out into the world again.

Weariness and languor are her prevailing sensations now, and she does not know that her elastic young constitution has been overstrained, and that the utmost care is needed to restore it to its proper tension. She does not know, and there is no one to tell her, for Belle Saltoun is far away by this time, and her husband confines his supervision of her health to requests that she "will take care of herself"—as if she knew how to do it!—and commands that she "does not allow the child to worry her." "She has a nurse; why should she keep a dog and bark herself?" he asks, when the poor languor-stricken mother toils about in vain, painful endeavour to keep the nursery

peace. He also kindly suggests that "Polly should walk a good deal;" never taking into consideration that Polly's overtasked frame invariably falls a prey to utter fatigue and prostrating neuralgia, after she has tried his invaluable panacea "of a long walk."

Fortune in one respect has greatly favoured Mr. Staunton. He has come into a property which is sufficiently good to enable him to retire from the Service and buy a place in the country, where there is beautiful scenery, and little or no society. He is "sick of the hollowness of the world;" he assures his wife he "has had enough of it," and never cares for anything beyond the occasional companionship of one or two intimate friends, on whose fidelity he can rely. So poor Polly, who has not had "enough of it" by any means, and who married before she had been taught to rely upon herself at all in any emergency, stagnates and grows sad, and pines with a hot pining that scorches all interest out of her daily life for a "change," which, he candidly assures her, he shall not allow her to have. "A woman's sphere is home," he tells her; "and if she has not a wholesome desire to shine in that sphere, he will not indulge her in the unwholesome one of desiring to shine elsewhere."

Into the midst of their unsatisfactory Arcadia Mrs. Saltoun comes by-and-bye; but, unfortunately, she only comes for a brief time. She, in her perfect happiness and content, is more beautiful and bright than ever; and Polly's husband feels a good deal of what he calls "justifiable annoyance," when he contrasts her younger sister, his wife, with still brilliant Belle. He complains to the latter that Polly mopes, and "looks tired when he comes in and wants her to amuse him." And when Mrs. Saltoun suggests that perhaps Polly is not well, he laughs at the notion.

"She has everything she wants, except excitement," he says, "and that she is better without." Then he repeats his phrase about a woman's proper sphere

being her home. And Mrs. Saltoun calls him a prig in her heart, but is powerless to help her sister.

A more utterly uninteresting being, as far as continuous intercourse with him goes, does not exist on this pleasant earth than Mr. Staunton. He is methodical, to an irritating degree, to every person who does not believe that he or she is graduating for perdition, if he or she has not a place for everything and everything in its place. He is punctual to the point of being raspingly ill-humoured, if he has to wait a moment for anything he has ordered at a certain time, even though fate and uncontrollable circumstances have intervened to cause the delay, and there has not been a particle of carelessness in the transaction. He fatigues himself pleasantly every day by hunting or coursing, shooting or fishing, in company with men who are like-minded to himself, and so are thoroughly congenial and acceptable associates to him. This being the case, slumber, as a rule, claims him for her own during the long hours that intervene between dinner and bedtime; and Polly's proper sphere is the home from which he is absent all day, and in which he only sleeps when he returns to it at night!

"If I were not a thoroughly quiet, well-disposed fellow, Polly is just the woman to drive me from my home," Mr. Staunton sometimes tells himself virtuously, when he wakes up from a prolonged and happy sleep to find poor Polly sitting motionless before the window or the fire, according to the season, gazing with a sad, absent expression into the misty distance over the woods, or into the fiery vaults, in which she strives to picture possibilities that might have interested her and filled her heart. He is perfectly satisfied with himself and his manner of treating her. She has a handsome house, handsomely furnished, a good establishment, orders to "dress well, and let him have all the bills," and a pony-carriage to drive about in, when he doesn't want the pony. By day she has the society of her two baby children and

their nurse—he dislikes country neighbours, and so insists on Polly confining herself to a round of mere formal visiting. By night she has the solace of her own thoughts, and the sight of him steeped in slumber on the most comfortable sofa in any room they may chance to be occupying! Nevertheless, surrounded as she is with all these aids to happiness, it is clear to every one (but her husband) who sees her that Polly is not happy.

The solace of her own thoughts! Poor thing, the one centre round which her thoughts revolve happily is the old life at home, in the little rectory, which he has tried to teach her to despise. That is the one stage of her existence which has been suffered to come to perfection and live itself. Her childhood flourished and flowered, a bright, happy, natural, unstunted plant! But her girlhood was nipped in the bud, before it had been glorified by one touch of real romance. Her sister was right in feeling indignant with Mr. Staunton for having robbed the child of that time that is flooded "with the life's dull light that ne'er can shine again on stream"—he married Polly before she had tasted the joy and pain of the fever called "first love."

Mr. Staunton had a vast number of theories concerning Polly, and he propounded a great many of them to her sister Belle, whenever he saw the latter. One was, that retirement was good for his wife; another, that her brief experience of life had given her a taste for gaiety which he could not sufficiently condemn, though she never spoke about it! Another was, that a woman who was so systematically "silent as Polly was, when in the society of the most considerate of husbands," must either be burdened with a sulky temperament or a sorrowful secret.

"I think it's simply that she has nothing to say," Belle would answer, sadly.

"Then you imply that your sister is stupid?"

"Not at all; but a woman, in order to speak well (and unless she speaks well she had better hold her peace), must have education, experience, and frequent intercourse with others who have also something to say on the same grounds——"

"Polly belongs to a class of society which presupposes that she has had these advantages," he interrupts.

"Society may presuppose what it pleases. She has had nothing of the kind," the elder sister says, bluntly. "You cut short her education at home, you did away with the possibility of her gaining any experience in the best school-house a woman can have—love—and you immure her here in the most stultifying of all atmospheres—comfortable solitude; how should Polly gain ideas? And even if they do spring up in such poor soil, how is she to learn the art of expressing them in words?—from her babies or her nurses?"

"You forget that she has me?" he says, stiffly.

"She has you to tell her, when you're in the vein, of what you and your gun did upon the hills in India; and for current history you give her details of Ponto's lameness and the Loughborough Hunt. Polly has no memories, excepting of the sudden way in which you swooped down upon her, and asked her to marry you, before you had taught her what love was. Be thankful that she has not created hopes for herself."

"One would think I had wronged her," he says, discontentedly. "I! who have given her a good home, my name—everything I had to give, in fact."

"You robbed her of the period of illusion," the elder sister answers. "And a woman who skips that will always be looking vaguely for the 'missing link' between herself and happiness. You should have been contented with giving her the bon-bons, as I advised you, a little longer; you should have let her live to feel that the sun was brighter to her when some one comes, and to grow desperate over the possibility of not seeing him for twenty-four hours; in fact,

you should have let her suffer and refine herself into womanhood, instead of jerking her into it as you did. Now all that remains for you is to bear your disappointment like a man, and save your daughters from the fate that overtakes plants that are forced into too early bloom. The child-wife is a pretty enough thing in fiction. In fact, she is a sacrifice to the greedy vanity of the man who will gather the bud, though he knows, if he does so, it can never develop into the rose."

A CHARMING COTERIE.

FOR many years of my life I have spent eleven months of them in endeavouring to make, invest, collect, save, and generally scrape together, such sums of money as will enable me to meet jovial, but rather expensive, Father Christmas with a frank and open countenance, and something approaching to the semblance of a welcome. This having been my main object from all the firsts of January I have known, until all the twenty-fifths of December that I can remember, need I record it here that the few days left to me for undunned indulgence in the festive after-dinner nap—reckless extravagance in the matter of attempting to enjoy myself in the noisy bosom of my family, and wild flings into the mad debaucheries of cakes and ale generally—find me in such a state of exhaustion, from my futile annual effort to make both ends meet, that I pass them as a rule in torpor?

Now torpor is a very good thing in its way—a useful invention when the enemy, in the shape of dull friends, disagreeable topics, family feuds, lowering bills, and other such unpleasant subjects are on the "tapis." The time arrived when I came to regard it as an un-

wholesome, unwelcome accompanist to the rich, spirit-stirring song a real holiday ought to sing into my life. During all the days of my responsible being I have worked hard, earnestly, incessantly; hitherto my reward has been that I have been enabled to keep the wolf from the door—to keep the ravening creature from my own door, and from approaching the portals of those who were dearer to me than myself. But the time has passed for me to take active pleasure any longer in the passive, Quixotic enjoyment. I have a balance at my bankers, I tell myself with pride. The few weeks that intervene between my settlement of the bills that have harassed me all the year round, and my incurring fresh bills for the year to come, shall be spent in trying to realise some of the dreams of my youth. I will hie me from garish, gay, selfish, heartless London. (Though I say this I fail to recall any special instance of either heartlessness or selfishness on the parts of any of my London friends.) I will respond to the friendly zeal with which my friend Harwood has pursued me, with cordial invitations, "to go down to Charchester, and take them as I find them in his homely quarters." I will, in short, take my hardly-earned winter holiday in a place that has been described to me as the real elysium on earth—an English sea-side town, brimming over with good society and good feeling.

"None of your petty jealousies, and ignoble squabbles, and vile scandals, down with us at Charchester, Jack!" Harwood had said to me heartily, when inviting me down to his "little place," with wild eagerness, in the summer. "You London people feed at each other's tables, and go straight away and cut each other's throats, and laugh at each other's foibles. Now that's not my idea of hospitality and social life. I say, sir, when a man eats another man's salt," and so on, and so on, ad libitum.

To the best of my ability I explained to my Arcadian friend that my memory might be bad, but that

still I thought it would have served me had any such sanguinary proceeding, as that at which he had darkly hinted, taken place in our London coterie. But before I had concluded my appeal on behalf of something like a moderate belief in a decent feeling existing between us, Mrs. Harwood's silver-bell-like voice struck in:

"It's positively shocking, to me, Mr. Belsize, to see how satiated the young girls of your set are with everything. Miss Belfer was critical last night about the way the Colleen Bawn was put on the stage; she mentioned, too, that Delport's wife had run away from him, because he hit her on the head with a poker. She must be quite young still, but she mentioned these things with an air of confidence and authority that shocked me—positively shocked me."

"Mary Belfer is as good and sweet a girl as ever breathed," I replied; "but she has lived in a high-pressure atmosphere. Her father is editor of an important daily. She hears the play discussed before it is acted; she learns from a side-wind what is said of the star of the theatrical season at rehearsal. Delport and his wife both visited in her set; how can she avoid knowing that they are unfortunately separated?"

"I call it a most demoralising atmosphere," Mrs. Harwood replied, severely; "no wonder that you look weary and worn out after living in it so long. Come to Charchester, and I'll introduce you to a dozen girls quite as pretty and clever as Mary Belfer—girls who don't mangle celebrated actors' reputations, or give you the latest news from the Divorce Court."

"Yes, yes; come to us, Jack," Harwood struck in, heartily; "and we'll show you what country life is in a charming coterie."

Now the time had come for me to avail myself of all this kindness; and I started with a head full of pleasant anticipations, and a heart brimming over with peace, good-will, and loving-kindness towards all my

fellow-creatures. Mary Belfer had bidden me God-speed on my journey in the heartiest way possible. Nevertheless, I felt that it would have been more gratifying had she shown more modified satisfaction at my departure.

"Good-bye, Jack," she said, as we parted on the staircase, at one of Lady Litter's "At homes." "I'm glad you're going away for a change—you need it terribly; and that lovely air is sure to do you good. Where are you going?"

"You remarked that the 'lovely air' would be sure to do me good, and now you ask me where I'm going," I replied, with bitter sarcasm filling my heart and failing to express itself in words. I have always been rather fond of Mary, and I felt rather hurt on this occasion to perceive how utterly the prospect of my prolonged absence from town failed to move her.

"I take it for granted that you wouldn't go away from London just now, when everything is in full swing, unless you were going to a place where the air was lovely," she rejoined, promptly. "But don't cavil at what I say; you won't hear my words of wisdom much longer. Tell me—where are you going, and what are you going to do? Marry?"

"Certainly not," I said, in dignified tones. "I'm going down merely on an informal visit to some very old friends at Charchester."

"Charchester!" she interrupted, with a laugh. "Well, I hope you'll like it; wouldn't I like to go there for a few weeks! Oh Jack! I wish I could go down with you. What a bore it is that I am not a boy for this occasion only; if I were we'd run down together, and give Charchester something to gossip about."

"My dear girl," I interposed, in my most superior tone, "Charchester is not at all a place after Mary Belfer's heart, or in which Mary Belfer could shine! I have friends who have been living there for years, and it was quite amusing to me to see the impatience

with which they hied them back to its purer air, after a month's experience of the way we live now in London."

"It's always delightful to see the patriotic spirit displaying itself unnecessarily as well as necessarily, in small as well as in big things," Mary replied, with a laugh. "Well, we shall hear of you, I presume, while you're blowing the shepherd's reed, and leading a quiet flock to feed, and all that sort of thing; good-bye!" And Mary glided on down the staircase in the wake of her chaperon, giving me one kind glance as she went, the memory of which I took down with me to Charchester.

My train was late; I learnt afterwards that the trains were always late in arriving at Charchester. The country is so lovely for the last fifty miles before you reach it, that the kind-hearted engine-drivers eat lotus, and give the passengers plenty of time to enjoy the scenery. However, Harwood was at the station to meet me in a well-turned-out mail-phaeton, in which he was driving a couple of handsome, well-matched horses.

"I flatter myself that not many things pass me on the road round about here," he remarked to me as we dashed away from the station, and took the road that led right through the bright, gay-looking town towards his house, which was embowered in a wooded dell between two cliffs on the coast.

"You pride yourself on your cattle, I see," I remarked, not knowing what else to say. The subject of another man's stable was not an absorbingly interesting one to me. My chief acquaintance with that noble animal, the horse, has been formed from my daily observation of those that are drawing me, when I am perched on the knife-board of an omnibus.

"Rather," he answered dryly, in the disgusted tones of one who has trotted out his hobby and failed to win admiration of its paces. "When you've seen Maggie's mare, and the pony she drives in her little dog-cart,

and my hunters, you'll acknowledge that I have some reason to 'take pride in my cattle.'"

Mrs. Harwood was as beaming, bright, and charming a hostess as the heart of the most exacting guest could desire. The dinner was excellent; the house, grounds, and all the appointments were in beautiful order and admirable taste. "Here is peace!" I said enthusiastically to myself, as I smoked my last cigar out of my bed-room window that night. "I see the life of luxurious retirement they lead is exactly the one to restore the tone to my faded system; I shall have nothing to disturb me—

> "No doubtful balance of rights and wrongs;
> No weary lawyers with endless tongues;
> But low of cattle, and song of birds,
> And health, and quiet, and loving words."

I rose up in the morning, feeling rejuvenated by the prospect. It would be such effortless enjoyment. There was the lawn, with its groups of drooping trees shading comfortable seats; there was the billiard-room, with its low divan running all round the room; there were the horses, waiting my orders, in the stable; and there was the prettiest little yacht ever built, dancing at anchor in the bay, ready to take me a cruise, at any moment I liked, round a splendid bit of coast. I counted up my privileges, and resolved to enjoy them.

"Let us take a turn down to the club," Harwood said to me after breakfast, just as I had settled myself in a shady nook on the lawn, with three newspapers and half-a-dozen dogs.

"The club! You don't mean to say you go to one here? You might as well be in London," I urged discontentedly.

"The fact is, Jack, I must go down; there's a row on about the last regatta, and several of the members are trying to make it too hot for me; besides, I want to

show you the town, and some of our 'rosebud garden of girls.' Come along!"

I went along, feeling that I might almost as well have been making my way to the Garrick. However, it was easier to obey than to revolt. Accordingly, Jack and I strolled down to the club, where several of the members looked blankly black at him; and he kindly enlightened me as to the antecedents of a few more.

"Look at that fellow over there, with the boots and gaiters," he muttered; "looks like a middle-class Norfolk farmer, doesn't he? Calls himself 'Duc de Lasmes,' forsooth, and has cooked up a pedigree and put it in Debrett! My good fellow, that isle of the free, Jersey, could tell you some tales about him."

"Don't care to hear them," I said, languidly.

"Well, well, I acknowledge he's not a savoury subject. I can only say I scratch my horse as soon as I hear he has anything to do with a race. He's shady all round; has a wife somewhere whom he never produces—fancy a duchess kept dark!"

"Let us go and look at the 'rosebud garden of girls,'" I suggested, by way of turning the conversation, and accordingly we sallied out, and began pacing up and down the one long promenade, where, as Harwood assured me, we were sure to meet all that was worth meeting.

Charchester supplied a splendid show of pretty women and fair young girls that day, and I must credit them with this—namely, that almost without exception they dressed well! There was no slovenliness, no seaside, slouchy untidyness about them, to nullify the effect of faces and figures that were, in the majority of cases, I was bound to confess, charming!

"Who are those three well-set-up-girls?" I asked, indicating a trio in navy-blue serge, embroidered in black.

"They're known familiarly as the 'Give-us-a-trial' girls. Their father has patented a sewing-machine,

made a fortune by it, and has built a huge place, with stabling for twenty horses—a cross between a Chinese pagoda and an Elizabethan mansion—out on the Markham-road. My wife could tell you two or three stories about them; they don't stick at trifles while they're trying to settle themselves."

We had turned by this time, and met them again, and now they were accompanied by a handsome young fellow with a weak chin, and an overpowering air of insufferable conceit about him.

"Ugh! Look there!" Harwood exclaimed contemptuously; "they've got young Roper in tow. The fool has just come into his property, which he is spending in the most approved forms of low vice; but any one of those girls would marry him if he held his finger up."

"Who's that?" I asked, eagerly, as a graceful woman, with the face of a Murillo's Madonna, passed us, leading a handsome little boy by the hand, and followed by a huge St. Bernard dog.

"That's Mrs. Chester—the prettiest woman, and the most fascinating too, by Jove! in Charchester. It's a case of 'Cry havoc! and let loose the dogs of war' whenever her name is mentioned. Don't say to Maggie that we've seen her. Here's Kate Rawdon at last; I've been waiting to introduce you to her."

Kate Rawdon was amenable to his advances, and permitted the introduction; and as soon as we had resumed our promenade by her side, Harwood left me with her, and went off to join Mrs. Chester.

"Are you a stranger here?" the young lady began, patronisingly. She was a fine blonde, with hair that glittered, and teeth and eyes that flashed. I admitted that I was a stranger, and she resumed:

"Ah, then! till you get into the swim you won't care for us much; not but what Mrs. Harwood can post you up in all the gossip as well as any one I know—some people would tell you, better, 'because she originates it;' but *I* won't say so. If you want to see

a sweet picture painted of your hostess, go to Mrs. Chester——"

"The lady Harwood is talking to now?"

"Yes, certainly; why shouldn't he talk to her? Oh! his wife and Mrs. Chester love each other dearly—it's a great joke."

"What a lovely little boy!" I said.

"Yes, and she's devoted to him—on the promenade; she knows that people must look at her, when she has that dog with her. She gives charming parties. I hope we shall meet there. Good-bye; I must go and join a friend."

She hastened off in the direction of a laughing, brilliant group of girls, and, seeing me alone, Harwood rejoined me.

"How do you like Miss Rawdon?"

"Not a bit."

"Not like the 'bonnie Kate?'" he asked, in surprise. "Don't tell my wife—she swears by Kate Rawdon. There goes Roper up to the Royal for another peg! The way that fellow drinks is awful; if he had any brains they must soon soften. We'll go back to Maggie and luncheon."

We went back to Maggie and luncheon, and found the former in her habit, ready for her afternoon ride.

"The way some girls behave is really disgusting," she began at once; "the Crofton girls have been here all the morning, boring me terribly. They'd evidently heard that we had an unmarried man staying with us; they're awfully forward."

"They are very nice girls—no nonsense about them," Harwood put in, deprecatingly. "I've asked them to go out with us to-morrow for a sail."

"Then you'll go without me," his wife replied, testily.

"No, no, you'll go too, and ask your friend Kate Rawdon," he said, good-temperedly.

"I shall do nothing of the kind; I'm beginning to think Kate Rawdon a double-faced little thing. The

Croftons tell me that Kate and Mrs. Chester have struck up an alliance."

"Don't you like Mrs. Chester?" I asked, innocently.

"Like Mrs. Chester! No; I confess to the weakness of having a preference for respectable women who live with their husbands."

"She can't well live with him on board the Arrogant, off the West Coast of Africa," Harwood says, calmly; "you know she intends rejoining him directly he comes home."

"I know nothing of the sort; I know that I consider her a disgrace to Charchester society, and I shall withdraw my name from the subscription balls if she goes to them. Look at her friends? Louisa Dale is her chosen associate. Louisa Dale! It is really disgraceful!"

"I wonder what they think of you, old lady, when my back is turned?" her husband laughed. And she replied:

"The 'Give-me-a-trial' girls and Lousia Dale are capable of saying anything—I know that very well; but they're preferable to Miss Donne. She is the most audacious creature I ever met with in my life. Poor Captain Vaux, I pity him."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because she has got him to promise to marry her," Mrs. Harwood said, angrily; "and I'll tell you how they say she did it. There had been a great picnic out at the Worthleigh Woods, and Captain Vaux had taken a number of them—a clique they call the 'Irish Brigade'—out in his drag. When they were coming home, Miss Donne stepped up and took the box-seat beside the driver; and when some one else who wanted it remonstrated with her, she answered, 'I mean to keep my place. He's warranted to "strike only on the box;" and I mean to have an offer from him going home.' If he were my brother I know what I should do; as it is——"

"You have to grin and bear it, for fear they should say in scandalous circles that you have a tendresse for him yourself," her husband laughed

"Not one woman pronounced to be pure; not one girl suffered to go scatheless!" I said to myself as I went to bed that night. "I am tired of this Arcadia; its charming coterie is more alarming than a band of wild barbarians would be; the 'Village' and Mary Belfer are good enough for me. I'll go back to them to-morrow."

HOW WE PARTED.

I AM no longer a young girl. The age of illusions is over with me, and that which I state now, I state with a calm conviction in its truth which no amount of incredulity can shake; and incredulity, I may mention, has very often attempted to shake this conviction of mine. However, I cling to it as I do to one or two other half-painful, half-pleasant, wholly sweet memories of my life.

It is many years ago since I was a school-girl; so many, that friendships really were formed between young ladies in the transition state before "the brook and river meet," friendships which outlived the last vacation and influenced our thoughts and plans for a year or two after the conclusion of our educational careers. In short, it was before the "girl of the period" existed, as a source of woe to herself, and of derision to others.

It chanced that I formed one of these healthy and robust alliances with a girl of my own age, but not of my own temperament. Our physiques differed as widely as did our fates. Perhaps this may have been one of the causes which tended to make our bond a peaceful and pleasant one.

She had been christened Emmeline by a Minerva-Press-loving mother, but to me, and to others of her familiars, she was always Milly Deane. A handsome brunette, with a wealth of colour and vitality about her that made of her large-pupilled grey eyes two dancing stars, and of her rounded firm cheeks two ever-blooming roses. A firm upright girl, whose attitudes never required correction at the tongue of the stiffest of governesses, and whose back never was condemned to the ignominy of a board.

Readers always wish to know what the *secunda donna* is like, nearly as much as they do what the *prima donna* is like. I have described the latter, and the paltry consideration of myself being the former is cause insufficient to prevent my gratifying them. In the days of which I write, if Milly Deane was a fair embodiment of night, I was a fairer one of morning; for I had waves of feathery ringlets of bright gold, when she had pounds of bonny brown ones; and pale pink roses in my cheeks in place of her crimson blooms.

A bright-coloured blonde, with the figure of a fairy, what wonder was it that, in our prophetical confidences, for me was reserved the honour of all the adventure, and most of the love, and a goodly portion of the sorrow that between us we claimed as our very own. The daughters of the royal tribe of wanderers—those dusky flowers who break into bloom all over the land simultaneously whenever the sun shines genially—had told our fortunes over and over again. I, Annette Davant, was to love, and be loved by, a dark gentleman, whose lot was cast in India, whither I was to accompany him, and live a life of Oriental splendour, amongst elephants, and punkahs, and Cashmere shawls. Milly, on the contrary, was to marry young and happily a gentleman who rolled in wealth in the city, and to have a large family, and a long life, and everything else that the heart of woman can desire. We accepted these prophecies with assumed incredulity, and real belief. Even at this distance of time, remembering

what we were then, it seems natural that all the poetry of life should have been apportioned to me. Practically I prefer the wholesome, hearty, tangible prose; but when I resembled a glorified fairy, of fine proportions, I was not at all practical.

We left school the same quarter, and came out at the same county ball. Our homes were not very far apart —fifteen miles in the country is a very trifling obstacle to friendly and frequent intercourse. Milly Deane's home was in the high street of a flourishing country town; a tall, square, considerable mansion of red brick, with white stone copings, which her father had bought the freehold of on his attaining the position of first solicitor in the neighbourhood.

My home, as beseemed me best, was more exclusively situated. It was an old, rambling, picturesque Grange, in the environs of one of the prettiest villages of Norfolk. A house with an oaken parlour, and a cedar room in it, with a grand old grey-balustraded terrace in front of it, and with our coat-of-arms carved massively on a shield over the entrance door. It was in this house that I came home to live just before Milly Deane and I made our *début* at the county ball.

Ours was a very small family. It consisted only of my mother, who was widowed when I was a baby, my sister, many years older than I, and myself. Our household was composed of a number of old, stolidly-unimaginative servants, who had lived with us for years, and to whom our interests and our nerves were of the dearest consequence. They were tenacious, too, about the regulation of the house. Idle rumour asserted it to be haunted by a discreditable ancestress, but none of those then resident in the house had either seen anything or heard anything when I left school with Milly Deane.

In the order of things—at least in what appeared to be the order of things to young girls' minds—my favourite schoolfellow and I deemed it incumbent upon ourselves to spend a large portion of our time

together. It was easy enough to ride and drive over to see one another constantly; but that did not satisfy us. Friendship demanded that we should stay at each others' houses—that our morning aspirations and evening conclusions should be breathed into each others' ears—and the demands of friendship were attended to. We did these things, and I don't know that we were ever the worse for doing them, in spite of the current scepticism which mocks at all that it does not understand.

We used to compose, revise, and edit a goodly number of fairy tales in those days that we spent together in the old Grange at home. Not regular acknowledged fairy tales. Those that we imagined never began with the frankly mystifying words, "Once upon a time," nor had they to do with the greenwood dell, nor did they enlarge upon the doings of duplicates of Puck and Titania. Indeed, at the time, the only fault each had to find with the sketchy prognostications of the other was, that they were too possible, too probable, too plain and unexciting. It was so natural, in those young sunny days, to think that life would get sunnier and sunnier for us; so natural to look for ample compensation for the wealth and affluence that had been gipsy-promised to the one, and the elephants and Cashmere shawls that had been, so to say, flaunted before the other. It was all so natural. So natural that I, a middle-aged woman, passing a prosperous Christmas with my nearest and dearest around me, marvel for a moment that it has not been verified.

The county ball, at which Milly Deane and I were to make our first appearance as grown-up and eligible young ladies, came off in the Christmas week of 1850. It had been the source of joy and woe to us both for at least a fortnight previously—that is to say, we were charmed at the idea of going—but, as became young women to whom it was still left to make the first impression, we stood very much upon the order of our going, and were severe, even in our slumbers, with

audacious dressmakers, who presumed to hold adverse opinions to ours on the important subject of when it was needful for our costumes to come home.

For several days before the great event Milly had been staying at the Grange with me, sharing my room, as well as my costumes, cares, and creating a feeling of dismay in the minds of one or two of our old servants by her obstinate persistence in stating that the house was haunted. It was about a week before the ball that she confided her conviction to me, first quite calmly. I had run up hurriedly into my room one afternoon, when darkness was just creeping over things, meaning to dress quickly for the dinner, that my dear mother never liked to have kept waiting. I burst into the room, with my hat and habit on, my hair blowing about somewhat loosely, and my whip in my hand, just as I had come in from riding since two o'clock. Candles were burning on my dressing-table, and, by the fire Milly stood ready-dressed in a soft amber silk, which became her dark glowing beauty well. She was speaking and laughing as I came into the room ; and, to my surprise—for I made sufficient noise—she did not look up at my entrance. The words I caught were,—"Will call me the yellow crocus still, for I wore this dress the last night he saw me."

I looked round the room in an instant. There was no one but ourselves in it. She must have been speaking to herself—yet that was never a habit of hers. In that instant my face had time to pale, and my flesh had time to creep. "Milly!" I exclaimed, and she looked straight at me without the slightest start or hesitation. As her gaze fell upon me, though, she gave vent to a surprised ejaculation,—

"Annette, how have you managed to metamorphose yourself in this minute?" she asked quickly, and I said,—

"In this minute, indeed! I am very much as I have been ever since I started for my ride, I believe. Rather blown about, but otherwise very much the

same as before," and I turned complacently to survey myself in the glass, as I spoke.

Milly Deane came and put her hand on my shoulder, and looked at me with bewildered eyes.

"You came in some time ago, Annette—half an hour ago, at least," she said, earnestly.

"I didn't. I wish I had; I shall be late for dinner, as it is, and then mamma will rebuke me with a smile that makes me ever so much more sorry for vexing her than if she frowned," I answered, beginning to hurry off my riding gear.

"But you *did*," she repeated, emphatically. "How silly of you to try to mystify me! why you should have taken the trouble to put on your habit again, puzzles me."

"I have never had it off, Milly," I said, rather crossly; "it is you who are trying to mystify me, talking to yourself aloud, and arraying yourself in amber silk, as if some one was coming."

"I was not talking to myself, I was talking to you," she said, indignantly; "and you told me yourself to put on this dress, when you said Captain Danvers was coming."

"I have never spoken to you since luncheon," I said, beginning to think that she must be mad, or think me so; "and as to Captain Danvers, I have never even heard of him."

Her face blanched as I spoke, with a sort of horror that quickly reflected itself in mine.

"You never told me to put on this dress because he was coming?" she said, interrogatively.

"No, I didn't," I said, shaking my head.

"Do go and ask Mrs. Davant if you didn't come with that message to me, half an hour ago. Stay! I'll come too. I dare not be alone now."

"I shall not face mamma until dinner is ready," I said, going on with my dressing. "Half an hour ago I was two miles away from home, in the middle of the common, on Cock Robin."

"Then the house is haunted," Milly said; "and I have seen and spoken to a spirit. And it was like you," she added, stammeringly; and then she sat down, and seemed to be trying to collect herself.

I was very little impressed by the incident, imaginative and rather disposed to the ideal in preference to the real as I was at that time. I had a very natural elucidation to offer, both to her and to myself, of this seeming mystery.

"You probably sat down by the fire when you came up to dress?" I asked her.

She nodded assent.

"There is the clue to your mental maze," I said, rather scornfully. "The heat overcame you, and you slept and dreamt a dream that has bothered you. Who is Captain Danvers?"

"It may have been a dream; but if it was, I am not awake now," she said, slowly; "it was so vivid—so horribly vivid. I will just tell you how it all happened—or how it seemed to happen," she said, disregarding my question as to Captain Danvers. "I was sitting by the fire in my dressing-gown, when you came quickly into the room, dressed in a blue silk, with a quantity of Christmas roses in your hair and on your bosom. You didn't look at me, but you said, 'Make haste, aud dress yourself in your amber silk, Milly; mamma wishes it.' And when I asked, 'Why?' you said, 'Oh! because Captain Danvers is coming to dinner.' Then you went out again, and I dressed; and that is all."

"A dream!" I said, laughing. "Now, I am ready; mamma will think you crazy when she sees you such a swell. Who is Captain Danvers?"

"An army officer," Milly said, with a young country girl's pride in knowing a military man. "I saw him several times while I was up in London with my aunt."

"You never mentioned him to me," I said.

"I know that," she said, blushing a little. "I

made myself a goose about him, so aunt said," she continued, laughing, "and so I have held my tongue about him since; but I was very glad indeed when you told me just now that he was coming here to dine."

"When you dreamt it," I insisted; and then we went in to dinner, and told this joke, as we both began to consider it, to mamma.

By the time the ball came off, we had nearly forgotten Milly's vision, as she would insist on calling it. We had had many other things to think about, and were both radiantly regardless of portents when we entered the assembly-rooms, in which, as the local papers would be sure to say the next morning, all the "rank, fashion, and beauty of the county were gathered together."

It does not in the least matter my mentioning now, at this distance of time, that Milly and I were the rival belles of the evening. We were young, we were fresh, we were pretty—above all, we were new. Being both under the wing of the same *chaperone*, we met at long intervals during the progress of the ball, and in the midst of my own triumphs I found time to notice that Milly was frequently on the arm of a handsome, distinguished-looking man, a stranger, who was in the uniform of an infantry regiment.

There is no need to dwell at any great length on this portion of my story. Suffice it to say, that we both made conquests, as the phrase is, at that ball. But the impression that I made on two or three men who "bothered and beguiled me" into dancing with them, with what my *chaperone* deemed to be dangerous frequency, was as evanescent as that which they made on me. Not so, however, with Milly Deane and her distinguished-looking military friend.

"That is Captain Danvers, Annette;" she had time to whisper to me once in the evening; and from the tone of that whisper I judged that she fancied she had met with her fate.

I soon knew Captain Danvers very well indeed;

for shortly after that ball, he became Milly Deane's declared lover. I have called him distinguished looking, and so he was to our girlish eyes. Perhaps if we looked at him with the matured vision of to-day, we might substitute the word unhealthy for distinguished, and be considerably nearer the mark.

But in those days he was, if not a god of beauty, a very fair object of admiration to us. He was very tall and very slight, and his hair and eyes were both black and shining, and his face was of almost a ghastly pallor. Unquestionably he was a very striking looking man; and we stricken ones, in those early days, pronounced him an Apollo.

He talked in a way that was quite new to us both, too. We trembled, but admired, when he avowed his beliefs, which were few, and his non-beliefs, which were many. His shallow scepticism, and his mystical metaphysical allusions, seemed to be very brilliant things to us in those early hours of our luckless intercourse with him. Yet all the time I felt him to be a dangerous man, and wondered how Milly's infatuation would terminate for herself.

They were married in about four months from the ball at which they had renewed their acquaintance, but before their marriage, he was thrown from his pedestal in my imagination, and I began to tremble for my friend. The overthrow took place under the following circumstances. One night I met him at a party at which Milly was not present, and naturally he and I were thrown together. Well for me then that I was loyal to my friend, for, as I have hinted, the man had a rare fascination, and he brought it to bear upon me that night of my enlightenment.

Calmly I repeat that I was a beautiful blonde at that time, and the man made me understand that he saw me to be so. He crept on so subtly from point to point, that I was receiving an offer from the affianced of my friend before I well knew what was happening.

Angrily I repudiated his offer; bitterly I declared

that I could never look Milly in the face again; scornfully I listened to his asseverations of belief in its being best and loftiest to follow, in all things, one's inclinations. "Had I gone through the ceremony of marriage with a woman a thousand times over," he said, "I would leave her unscrupulously if I loved another woman better—as I love you now." I am not quite sure of what I said to him then, but my feeling at the moment I can recall;—it was a firm and fixed one, that Milly would have a precarious time of it in that realm of love and happiness into which she was about to enter so blindly, and unadvisedly, and blithely.

I kept my own counsel, and I conclude he kept his, for shortly afterwards Milly became his wife. The old school-girl promise that we had made to one another about the one who first became a bride claiming the services of the other, as bridesmaid, was broken. It was a very quiet wedding. Not a guest was present at it. "Captain Danvers disliked pageants on trifling occasions," was the inauspicious remark that got circulated abroad relative to this fact.

Milly went off to India almost immediately with her husband, and so we parted, my pretty friend and I. And soon a romance of my own swept her romance from my mind and memory, although for herself I had a warm affection still.

In a picture of every-day life, the prosaic details must be painted in, otherwise the picture is no picture at all of what really does occur. Moreover, it is necessary here to prove that my mind was not in a course of preparation for what really did occur. I drifted away from the old influences of soft, sad, sweet imaginings and illusions. I settled down into the happy wife of a prosperous man, and the proud mother of fair good children. I forgot the "old romance" which Milly and I had been wont to weave. I ceased to think of Captain Danvers, as of anything but a mock-heroic creature who would be sure to develop into whatever circumstances made him; and I told myself complacently, that if I had

known as much then of men, and manners, and matrimony as I did now, I would have saved Milly from the dubious consequences of a union with Captain Danvers.

But though I drifted away from the influence of the wild, improbably, pretty web of faint possibility which Milly and I had woven together, I did not drift away from Milly herself. We corresponded with tolerable regularity, I giving her every detail of my home life, and my dear husband's plans, and my prospects, and my charming children's looks, and health, and sayings and doings; and she, in return, telling me of Indian life, and customs, and scandals, reporting on it all so graphically, that I became enchanted with the gorgeous bright picture which she drew, although she declared herself to be wearied—wearied with it all!

Of her husband she never spoke after the first six months or so of her marriage. That she was a disappointed and unhappy woman I could not fail to perceive; but whether she had failed to herself, or he had failed towards her, I could not gather from her careless, reckless remarks. "When we meet again," I used to say to my husband, after every fresh letter from Milly, "when we meet again, I shall try to get her to be open with me, and then I may set things straight." He would sympathise with this hope of mine just at first; but, after a time, he took to shaking his head about the sanguine hope, and gravely recommended me not to interfere, and possibly stir up a moral sediment that might dim my friendship for Milly.

At the end of five years Mrs. Danvers came home alone, on a sort of sick leave which had been granted her by her husband. We were living in London at the time, and it seemed to me only natural that my solitary friend should have made our house her home. The very morning after her arrival in town, I went to the hotel at which she had given me her address, and solicited her to do so. But she refused decidedly at once, saying that she was better alone for many reasons; and

my husband shook his head more gravely still when I repeated this to him, and gave vent to the uncharitable sentiment, that "women who thought themselves better alone generally were better alone, for divers reasons."

The confidence that I was desirous of claiming, in the hope of making Milly happier than she seemed, was not forthcoming. I questioned her closely, with the loving curiosity my affection for her entitled me to display, as to how she was wont to pass her time, and whether her husband and herself were sympathetic in their pursuits or not.

"Very sympathetic!" she said once, rather harshly. "We both like to please ourselves."

"Have I been superseded, Milly?" I persisted. "Have you any female friend in India who seems nearer and dearer to you than I do?"

"I haven't a female friend besides yourself in the world," she said, quietly; "not one, I assure you, Annette; not one that I would go a yard out of my way to confide a joy or a sorrow to."

"You would confide both to me if we were thrown much together again," I said, determined not to be rebuffed.

"Not trivial ones."

"Great ones, then?" I said.

She moved uneasily off the sofa on which she had been reclining, and stood with her back to me, gazing out of the window.

"Great ones, perhaps," she said slowly, after a long pause. "Annette," and she turned round suddenly upon me, "shall I promise you that in the greatest trouble of my life I will come to you? I will so promise if you wish it."

"You may not be able to come to me," I began protesting. I was going on to say, "but I hope you always write to me if——" but she interrupted me.

"I may not be able to come to you *in the flesh*," she said emphatically; and I answered—

"That is exactly what I meant; but you will write?"

She nodded her beautiful head and said—

"I promise that, in my greatest trouble, I will come to you, Annette; and you, on your part, promise that you will not shrink from me."

An interruption occurred just then, and we never renewed the subject. I tried to do so more than once, hoping that I should wile her to confess what vague trouble she dreaded befalling her. But she always turned the conversation lightly, and I took it into my head that she was in danger from not loving her husband well enough, or from too well loving another man. That her husband was unworthy of her love I most firmly believed; not from what she said, but from what she did not say. She rarely mentioned him —never unless a direct question concerning him forced her to speak; and then the mention was of the briefest, coldest description.

"Annette," she said to me one day, when we were sitting alone, talking over our school-girl days, "have you a blue dress trimmed about the body and sleeves with Christmas roses?"

"No," I said, laughing; "haven't you forgotten my ghostly visitation to you yet. You dreamt I wore such a dress then, didn't you?"

She nodded assent.

"Dear, dear, what old women we are getting, Milly; that was seven years ago, and we had our first ball before us still; you were a sylph and I was a fairy in those days. Now see what I have become—rather a buxom matron."

"And see what *I* have become," she said drearily; or rather, don't see if you can avoid it. No, I haven't forgotten that ghostly visitation, and I never shall forget it."

"Hush!" I whispered, "here comes my husband; he laughs at all superstition; I shouldn't like him to know that I had been accused of playing bogie to a select audience; and never a word before my little

people, please, Milly. I won't have their nerves shaken."

Milly Danvers stayed in England about eight months; then she re-embarked for India, "which I shall probably never leave again," she said sadly.

"Does the climate try you so very much?" I asked anxiously.

"Cruelly! cruelly!" she said warmly; "I can't live there long."

"Does Captain Danvers know this?" I asked, indignantly.

"Yes, dear champion of mine," she said, affectionately.

"Why else should he wish me back?" she said, curling her lip a little; "of course he knows it. Captain Danvers would not miss me ——"

"Oh, yes, he would!" I interrupted, hastily; her tone was so desperately despairing, that I could not bear it. "Oh, yes, he would! why else should he wish you to go back to him?"

"Because no questions are asked, either about gradual decay, or sudden death there," she said; and then she peremptorily decreed that nothing more should be said about it.

We parted very soon after this, and when I heard from her that she had arrived in their cantonment in the Madras Presidency safely, the gloomy impression left upon my mind by our last interview faded away. Her letter was, as usual, filled with accounts of balls and all kinds of gaieties, and I naturally concluded that, as she was able to participate in all these things, she had exorcised the morbid spirit which had possession of her while she was in England.

Months passed away, and Christmas-tide was upon us. We had arranged a juvenile party on the occasion of our eldest child's seventh birthday, and, in decking out my little men and women, and arranging my rooms, I overlooked that usually important matter—my own toilette.

A couple of days before our juvenile ball, I laughingly told my husband of my dilemma. "I haven't a ball dress fresh enough to wear in honour of our little Milly," I said to him, "and really I have no time to go to my dressmaker."

"I will go and order you one; leave it to me, Annette," he replied; and I agreed to do so, only stipulating that he should not make me too fine, and that he should avoid pink.

The night of little Milly's ball arrived in due season; and, fatigued with my exertions, I went up to my dressing-room, determined upon resting until it was time for me to dress. My robe had not come home yet, but I could rely on Madame Varcoe's honour,—she had said that it should be home by half-past eight at the latest, and I knew that she would keep her word. Feeling thus easy, I fell asleep, and slept a dreamless sleep of some hour and a half. Then I awoke, and found my dress laid out ready for me to put on, and my maid waiting to do my hair.

"It's one of the prettiest dresses Madame Varcoe has ever made for you," my maid said, as I cast a glance towards the bed, "a most delicate rich blue, trimmed with the loveliest Christmas roses."

Strange as it may appear—at least, strange as it does appear to me now—I gave no thought at the time to the coincidence between my actual dress and the dress of Milly Deane's dream. My head was full of other things, and memory was effectually put to flight by the entrance of my three little girls, vociferously declaring "that I should be late, and that it seemed as if people were never coming."

But the little guests came all in good time, and enjoyed themselves almost as much as I did. I say almost as much as I did advisedly, for that must be the happiest ball for a woman which she organises for the first time for her eldest child. At any rate, I can imagine no higher Terpsichorean happiness than this. Yet the

day has been (not so very long ago either) when I enjoyed a ball as gaily as the gayest.

It was over at last, and when I had seen my pleased and sleepy children safely into their respective beds, I went slowly to my own room, and sat down by the fire to wait for my husband. I had told my maid that I would dispense with her services, and so I sat alone, and pleased myself with recalling the little ebullitions of childish pleasure which I had witnessed that night. My husband was down in his study still, looking through the evening papers, the late editions of which had been neglected by him in his endeavours to contribute to the little people's entertainment. It must have been about two o'clock in the morning, when I roused myself from my cheerful reverie, and stood up to commence my preparations for retiring for the night.

The chair I had been occupying was a large massive carved oak one, with a very high back. As I stood up, I became conscious without seeing anything, that some one was leaning on this back, and, thinking that it must be my husband, I said quietly, "You have come at last, dear?"

"At last," a very soft voice whispered—breathed rather; and then I turned round startled, and saw nothing on the spot from whence the voice had proceeded.

A nameless horror, a dreadful fear possessed me. I could not cry out; even in my agony of fear I revolted against doing that. When I could move—and for a few moments I was quite unable to do so—my impulse was to get nearer to the gas, which was low, and turn on a brighter light. I had two lamps in my room, one on either side of my cheval glass; and as I reached up to turn on a higher light, I caught sight of myself. I was in just such a dress as Milly had described me as wearing when she saw me, or fancied that she saw me, or dreamt that she saw me.

Sick and horrified, and chilled with a more than

mortal dread, I staggered back to my chair, and buried my face in my hands. Something swept softly up to me from a darker corner of the room, swept softly up and stood beside my chair. I felt the air grow heavier, as occupied air does grow. I heard low breathings; some one was bending over me nearer and nearer. Then the breathings formed themselves into words, into a word rather, and I heard my own name murmured distinctly, "Annette, Annette," and I knew that it was murmured in Milly Danvers' voice.

I shuddered, and tried to look up. I took my hands down from before my face, and strove to lift my eyes —and strove in vain. I could not do it. I had a dread of being so awfully frightened that I might never recover it. That Milly Danvers was standing close to me I was well assured. But I was also well assured that it was not Milly Danvers in the flesh. Then I remembered the words she had spoken to me. "I will promise to come to you in the greatest trouble of my life," she had said; and I felt, as her words flashed back upon me, that my friend must be in fearful trouble now.

Again the impalpable presence spoke, "Annette, remember the hour! note it!" Shiveringly, shudderingly I raised my eyes at last, and there, gliding away into the shade by the side of the bed, I saw a slight frail form. Instantaneously I turned to my clock. The hour hand stood at three, the minute hand at five minutes past twelve. I grasped the bell, "all my soul within me sinking," and rang such a peal as quickly brought my husband to my side. Then, with no hesitation now, with no dread of being laughed at and called superstitious (the time for the fear of that was over), I told him the whole of the story which I have written down here. When I had quite finished, he asked me what I thought, what I feared, and what I deduced from all I had seen and heard. He did not taunt me, as I had once taunted poor Milly, by calling it dreaming. That it was a portent, and that it boded

ill to my friend, I was firmly convinced, and he was willing to allow. But I was madly impatient to test the truth of my conviction, and he was calmly contented to wait and abide the issue.

I wrote to Milly the following day, and I got no answer. I wrote again, and my second letter shared the fate of my first one. Then I gave up the attempt to elucidate whatever of mystery there was in the affair, and tried to forget it—and could not.

Just twelve months after this, I was spending the Christmas week, together with my husband, at the house of one of his married sisters, in the country. We arrived just in time to dress for dinner, and in the brief interval between my going up to my room for that purpose, and being joined by my husband, my sister-in-law came to speak to me for a minute.

"We have a goodly party dining here to-day, Annette," she said, hurriedly, just looking in at the door.

"Have you? unpleasant person; when I am almost too tired to dress, and make a good impression," I replied, laughing.

"You made a good impression on one of the party, at least, many years ago," she said. "Captain Danvers expressed the greatest pleasure at meeting you again."

"Captain Danvers! is he here?"

"He is, with his wife," she said, shutting the door, and running off; and I was left alone, repeating to myself, "His wife! Then Milly is not dead!"

These were the first words that I uttered when my husband came into the room. He sympathised with my emotion and agitation, and did not reprove me for conjecturing all manner of wild improbabilities. "Can she have taken a dislike to me?" I kept on asking. "Can he be such a wretch as to forbid her holding any communication with an old friend, who really loves her? What can have prevented her writing to me?"

"I dare say you will hear before the evening is over,

Annette," he said, kindly; and then we dressed, and went down to dinner.

I recognised Captain Danvers the instant I got into the drawing-room. He was considerably altered; still I knew him at a glance. He was paler, if possible, than he had been of yore; his hair and eyes were more (or seemed to be more) intensely black than ever. He was only a peculiar looking man, I found, instead of the very handsome and distinguished man I had once thought him. Impulsively I looked round the room. Milly was not there. Impulsively I went up to him, and asked, as I took his offered hand, "Where is your wife?"

"She will be here in a few moments," he answered, smiling his old, brilliantly flashing smile; and the wild throbbing at my heart ceased. She was alive, and she was here! That was sufficient for me. I curbed my impatience, and stood still, watching the door.

Two or three ladies, strangers to me, entered the room, and, a moment after, my brother-in-law asked a gentleman to take me down to dinner. We all went down. Captain Danvers was on the opposite side of the table, at some little distance from me. I looked round the table, and Milly was not there.

The dinner that day seemed to be an endless affair to me. I felt angry with my sister-in-law, and thought that she was sitting an unconscionably long time. My neighbour was a prosy country squire, a pompous, rich, inflated, ignorant creature of the type that believes that outside his own lands and his own interests is space, and nothing more.

"Have you seen Mrs. Danvers yet?" I asked him; and he shook his head, and said he "hadn't even heard of her."

"She is the wife of Captain Danvers, that gentleman opposite to you," I said, quickly.

"I don't call on any of the regiments that are quartered about my place," he said, pompously.

"Captain Danvers is only just home from India, I believe," I explained.

"Ah!" he said, indifferently; and then he drank some hock, and looked duller than before.

Failing to gain any information from him, made me naturally the more impatient to ask our hostess where Mrs. Danvers was. I went to her (my sister-in-law) the moment we got into the drawing-room. "Where is Mrs. Danvers?" I said; "she is my dearest old friend, and I'm longing to see her."

"You might have renewed your acquaintance at the table, then, surely," she said, pointing out a fair, pretty young woman whom I had observed sitting very near to me at dinner.

"*That* Mrs. Danvers! impossible!"

"But the truth, notwithstanding," she said, laughing; "she is a bride, and a beauty, and altogether rather an acquisition to my Christmas party, I consider."

I was almost stunned at the revelation of Milly's death. True, I had been prepared for it for a long time previously; but this evening hope had been renewed, and it was hard to have it extinguished again. Very, very sorrowfully I thought of her, and of her untimely fate. Very eagerly did I desire to learn how, and when, and where Milly had died.

It roused my ire, when the men came in, that Captain Danvers should come sauntering up to me suavely and smilingly. "Just as if nothing had happened," I told myself, indignantly.

"Now, at last, I can renew my acquaintance—my very pleasant acquaintance with you," he began, but I cut him short at once, by saying—

"Captain Danvers, when did Milly die?"

"Last Christmas Eve," he said, still smiling.

"At five minutes past three?" I asked eagerly, and he said—

"Yes."

And as he said it the two ghostly episodes which

connected the three (Milly, Captain Danvers, and myself) together, stood out like bodily presences before my eyes.

My story is finished. Call it a ghost story, a fable, a fancy—what you will. I can only declare that the spiritual visitations actually occurred. Milly's fate was never cleared up. She died, we learnt afterwards, after a long, tedious illness which defied the medical skill that was called in; nearly at the last, by her philosophically calm husband, Captain Danvers.

HIS STORY—AND MINE.

"I sought that day to lose his face again,
But Love was weaving in his golden loom
My story up with his, and all in vain
I strove to loose the threads he spun amain
When first we met!"

THERE is no doubt about it. These exquisite lines from one of Edmund Gosse's sonnets on "Fortunate Love" exactly express my condition. I have never been able to forget him for five minutes at a time, since that hour when he first flashed into my life, making it radiant with the radiance that only love can infuse into existence.

It was no use struggling against it. I surrendered to the dominion of the passion—that has never paled for a moment, though it has been hardly tried—when first we met, and, with a woman's unfailing intuition, I knew that it would be returned strongly and warmly, though, perhaps, neither wisely nor well. Perhaps for my ultimate weal—quite as probably for my ultimate woe. Byrne Pomeroy made me understand by one long, intense, eloquent gaze, that a kindred feeling to that which had flamed into being in my heart had found a place in his.

We met under very common-place circumstances,

and yet I had unaccountably deferred the meeting till long after it ought, in the ordinary course of events, to have taken place. Miss Pomeroy, his favourite sister, had been at school with me up in the breezy region of Hampstead Heath; and when I, a London born and bred girl, would drink in the fresh air with evident and unalloyed delight, she would laugh my appreciation of that atmosphere to scorn, and tell me how far freer, more bracing, and finer altogether were the zephyrs and the blasts that blew around her brother's picturesque old manor house up in the hardy North.

When the day came for Ella Pomeroy to leave school, and to return to her native place to fulfil the mission to which she considered she had been born, and which she believed one of the highest and happiest upon earth—namely, that of being the mistress of her brother Byrne's house—she gave me a cordial and genuine invitation to go with her for the holidays. But I shrank from the prospect of six weeks in cold and dreary Yorkshire in mid-winter. Moreover, the Christmas balls were many in our sets that winter, and my prettiest sister was lately married, and her house was the head-centre of many bridal festivities; and, altogether, the idea of leaving town and banishing myself into barren Yorkshire, with no other society for a permanency than that of Ella and Byrne Pomeroy, failed to present itself pleasantly before my imagination. Term after term passed, and at the expiration of each, brief but loving letters reached me from Ella, urging me, by all the ties of our girlish friendship, to "come and stay with her in her own home, and see how happy she was with her own brother." Something invariably intervened between me and my praiseworthy intentions of going. I was just eighteen before I could bring myself to the pass of tearing myself away from the heat and heart of London life, and going down to what I pre-imagined to be dull domesticity and certain monotony.

It was terribly cold and sombrely foggy when we glided out from the shelter of the Great Northern terminus, and it was even more terribly cold when we glided into the neat, little, out-of-the-way station away on the border-land that divides Yorkshire from its northern neighbour. But this cold was of a brisk and cheery and intensely earnest order, that was enlivening and refreshing even to my travel-tired frame. I left the railway carriage with a leap, and stood on the platform looking out for Ella, who had promised to come and meet me—the lightest-hearted, lightest-footed, and, I may add, the lightest-headed girl in the kingdom.

Standing at the doorway of the waiting-room, I saw myself reflected in the big glass over the mantel-piece, and I saw myself a very pleasant object—without partiality and without prejudice. Just above the middle height, fair and pale, with forget-me-not eyes, and wavy hair that was more nut brown than golden, and that yet glittered in the sun. How readily smiles parted my lips then, and how lightly laughter rippled out of my eyes on the slightest provocation! It is no exaggeration to say that, deeming myself—and knowing that others deemed me to be—a thing of beauty, I was a joy for ever to myself in those days.

Presently as I stood enjoying myself, and the appearance of warm, becoming, and softly-hued furs, a light footstep passed me, halted, and a quiet, gentle-toned voice said, close to my ear—

"I am sure, from my sister's description of you, that I am addressing Miss Walgrave;" and he took off his hat, and bowed a head covered with dark hair, that would have been curly had it been uncultivated, but that merely waved in silky rings over his brow, as it was conventional. Just in the one flash of my first glance at him, I saw him as he was, and as he has ever seemed to me—not strictly handsome, no boarding-school girl's Apollo; but simply the most impassioned, the most attractive, and the most strikingly tender

looking man that Providence ever created for the danger and the detriment of woman.

Supple, swinging frame, and soft, fascinating voice, tawny, deep-haunting eyes, and full, firm lips, that worked, even when he was in half repose, with the nervous susceptibility of a woman! What wonder that I surrendered my eighteen-year-old heart instantly to these attributes? What wonder that the face that had in it all a man's power, and all a girl's sweetness, became, from that moment, "when first we met," the lodestar of my life?

"Ella has sent you this note of explanation as to her non-appearance," he went on, in his musical, drawling monotone, tendering me a note as he spoke.

Had any one else spoken to me with—what shall I call it?—such extreme deliberation, I should have felt and shown impatience; but something in his languor soothed me into a state of even more harmonious feeling with him than I had been in before; and I put my hand on his arm, for him to lead me to the carriage, with the glad conviction, causing my heart to throb, that I was to spend six long weeks in the same house with this man, and that Ella had told me I was to be her only guest.

"Love was weaving in his golden loom
My story up with his, and all in vain
I strove to loose the threads he spun amain
When first we met."

We came out into the road outside the station, and I found to my delight that he had brought his mail phaeton for me, instead of the snug little brougham which Ella had promised to come over in.

"What a splendid pair of horses!" I cried out with enthusiasm; at which remark he burst from languor into fervour, like a flash of light, and springing to his horses' heads, stood patting, and praising, and caressing them, as if they had been women, or he had been a boy with a new toy.

He helped me up to my high seat with an air that

was new to me in my limited experience. I had been accustomed to be treated with politeness by friends, and with superficial, flattering gallantry by passing ball-room acquaintances; but in this man's manner there was a courteous tenderness that I had never been the object of in all my life. It was a mixture of womanly care, with manly power, that won another bit of my heart from me with unwise celerity. But then the magic web was pre-ordained to be woven. What matter whether the loom worked slowly or not?

"I am sure you'll not be frightened, even if the horses do go at a spanking pace home, after waiting in the cold," he said, dropping his words out to me in a confidential under-tone, as he took his seat by me. At the same moment the groom let go their heads, and made a bound for his seat behind, and the two bonnie chestnuts sprang into their trot in a way that made me quiver with that unaccountable feeling of exultation which is one of the earliest symptoms our guardian angels insist upon our feeling, when danger is approaching us, or, as is more frequently the case with women, when we are approaching danger.

"Do you enjoy it as much as I do?" he asked buoyantly, as, on turning into the road that led straight to their home, the horses increased their pace in a way that made me give vent to an ejaculation of pleasure and delight.

"Yes!" I answered, with all the uncalled-for exuberance of my age and sex.

I said my "Yes" out ringingly, heartily, with perfect carelessness as to whether the whole world heard me or not—not that a single denizen of the world, save Byrne himself, could possibly hear me at the pace at which we were going. Still, knowing this, I lowered my voice, for some undefined reason or other, as I went on to say—

"I believe I should enjoy anything you enjoyed."

"Here we are!" was his sole reply, and we swept as he spoke into a drive, through open gates, flanked

on either side by a picturesque lodge, and I gained a sort of additional respect, or, rather, a more perfect appreciation, of him, as I realised that he was the master and owner of this place, and that I was his guest, placed in the happy and proud position of being justified in expecting a large share of attention from him.

The house was all alight. A welcome blazed from every window. "After all," I thought, "no London windows ever spoke to me so warmly, however well they knew me, as these strange country ones are doing." The sentiment was strained and ungrateful as far as the well-known London windows were concerned; but I thought it pretty at the time, and believed it to be a just tribute merely to the superiority of Byrne's birth-place over every place that had ever been built by the hand of man.

Ella was out dancing down the steps the moment the phaeton was pulled up at the door; and I felt a positive pang of pleasure, as I saw her turn to her brother the instant after she had greeted me, to receive a salute that she was evidently certain of beforehand. "That nature must be sweet indeed which keeps constant and contented with a sister's quiet love down in these quiet, unemotional, stagnant parts of the earth!" I thought this in the first burst of my young, untutored inability to stand anything to which custom had not calmed me down. In truth, the knowledge that I was to live this country life, so far away from all that habit had made dear to me in London, would have been insupportable to me, had I not been taking this mental tonic the whole time—namely, that *he* would be here to share it with me!

There are certain epochs in every woman's existence which ought to be marked with a note of interrogation and a blot. The note of interrogation is for the "reason why" she is ready to make an example of weakness of herself; the blot is—for pity's sake!

The first few days of my stay in Byrne Pomeroy's

house were spent—unwillingly enough, as far as I was concerned—apart from him. He was a hard hunter, a man who really meant riding when he went out, and who, therefore, did not care to be hampered with the care of a couple of girls like Ella and myself, who were all very well in the saddle on the highway, but were cumbersome when it came to anything like cross-country work.

But happily for me, as I thought at the time, at the expiration of those few days, a hard frost set in, and scores of mighty hunters in that district were compelled to sulk at home. To his sister's great surprise, Byrne bore his privation unrepiningly. He threw himself heart and soul into the household amusements wherewith his sister and I sought to beguile our time. He wrote charades for us, and acted them too, and even devised and carried out a scheme for having penny readings at the village institute every week, at which Ella and I were to sing and play, and he was to recite, and to imitate, and to generally make an exquisitely intellectual buffoon of himself, whenever he had nothing better to do.

As might have been anticipated by "many far older than we—by many far wiser than we" (if there had been any such matured sages around or about us) the consequences of these philanthropic reunions, in which humour and humanity had equal shares, resulted in an intimacy of the frankest and most dangerous kind between Byrne and myself. He got into the habit of coming to me for counsel and advice—not that he ever dreamt of acting on the former, or accepting the latter; but I was delighted to give it, though sometimes it left me poor indeed, without materially enriching him.

I had lived in my fool's paradise for some three or four weeks, when I began to detect the shadow of a change in Ella. I had loved Ella for herself, from the time I had first met her at school, years ago, until the hour I met Byrne Pomeroy at the railway station.

From that hour I loved her for her brother, and I am bound to confess that the second love was considerably stronger than the first.

It must have been that she was so accustomed to Byrne herself—so very much in the habit of loving him, and thinking it natural that he should be loved—that she took no heed for several days of my rapidly growing infatuation. But one morning a sudden light seemed to dawn upon her, and I saw that her brother and myself were alternately the objects of her most scrutinising regard. She followed him quietly out of the room, when he went out to take his customary stroll through the stable—a stroll in which I had been wont to join him for some time—and stopped me from joining her with the words—

"Wait here, Maggie, till I come back. I want to speak to Byrne alone."

I obeyed her injunction without a protest, but my spirit chafed at what I considered her unjust interference with a privilege of mine which custom had transformed into a right in my estimation. However, I waited for Ella with a degree of outward patience that was exemplary, and when she did return to me, I greeted her with a smile that was far more genuine than my momentary feeling of anger against her had been.

"Where is Byrne?" I asked confidently.

"Gone out for the day," she answered, and there was a slight confusion in her manner which roused an indefinable dread in me.

"Gone out for the day, without a word to *me*?" I ejaculated.

"My dear Maggie! why should Byrne tell you of his outgoings and incomings; one would think——"

She paused abruptly, and I asked—"One would think what?"

"That you were Byrne's sister."

"I am very glad I'm not Byrne's sister," I laughed out. "Come, Ella, confess the truth; fond as you are

of me, you don't like to see that I am becoming number one with Byrne, and that you are number two."

I said it in a laughing, foolishly vain-glorious, but not malicious way, and I was startled to see Ella's face darken and lower ominously.

"Pray don't utter such ridiculous nonsense, even in jest," she said earnestly. "We can never, either of us, be number one with Byrne; he has a wife—he has gone to see her to-day."

All my womanly pride, all my girlish passion, all my hopes for the future, and joy in life, fell down battered and bruised at my feet as she spoke. But the instinct of my respect for her feelings as his sister saved me from showing her what his treachery had done for me. With the iron eating into my soul, the habit of my class enabled me to speak without a tremor, and to keep the muscles of my face steady, although I felt myself whitening under the conviction that Ella was stabbing me to death out of sheer necessity, and not out of a malicious desire to wound.

All I said was—"Why has he not been to see his wife before?"

"Don't question me too closely about Byrne's wife," she answered impatiently; "she is a subject on which I cannot speak temperately. I will leave it to him to tell you about her—if he can bring himself to do it. Poor child," she added impulsively, coming over to kiss me, and the kindness broke me down.

Kneeling at her feet, with my head on her lap, I sobbed out a mournful plea, that she would tell me why he had deceived me so, why he had tried to make me love him so well, when the love, as he must have known from the first, could never result in anything good for me. But to all my entreaties for an explanation she turned a deaf ear. "Byrne will tell you all that it is possible for you to know," she kept on repeating, "and he must extenuate his conduct towards you as best he can; I can't do it for him."

What a miserable day that was! Long, weary, humiliating, memory-racked hours intervened of necessity between the moment when the fatal truth was made manifest to me and the time when he came back to meet me, the girl he had injured, and to clear himself with me if he could.

He came in about half an hour before dinner, and found me waiting alone in the fire lighted drawing-room. Ella had advised me not to shun a *tête-à-tête* with him, and, painful as I knew the ordeal would be, I was only too glad to face it as soon as possible.

He came up to me, and placed his hand on my shoulder very gently, and stooped down to kiss me as was his wont. I had taken it so completely for granted that he was to be my husband in due course of time, that I had never dreamt of refusing him the caress, and even now when his lips met mine and the recollection shot through my mind that he was a married man, I felt that his unknown wife did me a far greater injury by existing, than I could ever do her by manifesting any amount of affection for her husband. All my anguish, all my misery, all my despair and love rose up in arms against the horrible injustice of everything, and I moaned out his name in the tone in which a fallen angel might utter the word Paradise.

"Ella has told you? It's a wretched business, isn't it?" he interrogated.

"She has told me nothing more than that you have a wife," I sobbed, freeing myself from his embrace, and he rose up and stood away from me in evident resentment.

"You're just like the rest of the world," he said, complainingly. "I was all very well while there was nothing difficult, nor detrimental in the acquaintanceship; now you're aware that there is a place in my life that it may be disagreeable or impossible to explore, and so you're going to let me slide, as the Yankees say. Well, I must put up with it, I suppose:

but to tell the truth, Maggie, I'm disappointed; I thought you were made of stauncher stuff."

I looked at him in utter bewilderment. Was this the explanation Ella had promised me on his behalf that Byrne would give me? This attempt to shuffle off the burden of the sense of wrong-doing from his own shoulders to mine was a stroke of meanness in my hero for which, dearly as I loved him, I despised him. Moreover, his manner of preparing to relinquish me without evincing very much pain hurt my vanity, and wounded my heart.

"Your disappointment can't equal mine. All this time you have been living a lie to me, Byrne, and I have been so loyal to you."

The reproach seemed to sting him, for he came nearer to me with an expression of such mingled pain and tenderness in his face that all my soul swayed round to the side of sympathy with him again.

"It's all the fault of my horrible position," he said, complainingly. "I told Ella when you were coming here, that we should drift into a flirtation unless she let me tell you about little Minnie."

"Who is little Minnie?" I asked, in a heart-broken tone, for intuition told me what his answer would be.

"My wife," he answered, unhesitatingly; and then I nerved myself to ask—

"Do you love her, Byrne?"

"I should have kept the love I had for her. I should have kept my honour towards you unstained; I should not have been the fellow I am, in fact, if nature's greatest curse had not been laid upon her. From the day of our marriage she has been mad."

IT WAS THE TIME OF ROSES.

IT was the time of roses! They were about everywhere, on the emerald green of our lawn — over the trellis-work that made a flowery veranda round our house—on my cheeks, from whence the roundness of youth had no more departed than had its bloom—and in my heart, where the flowers of hope, and joy, and love, were blossoming freely. In other words, I was eighteen years old.

Looking back at myself now, from the grave standpoint I have attained through a good deal of sorrow and suffering, I have to acknowledge that I was to a certain extent both frivolous and selfish in those early days of which I am writing. I was under the guardianship of an only brother, who was some eight years my senior, and who had the honour of becoming responsible for my well-being rather thrust upon him than otherwise. A good, grave, conscientious, clever young man of six-and-twenty, who had seen many phases of life, he suffered from a painful sense of incapacity as far as I was concerned. And I, being keen-witted and sharp-sighted, detected his feelings on the subject, and wrought it to my own will in many ways.

Our home was in one of the eastern counties, one of the best cultivated and most prosperous portions of the land, being my brother's by the "right divine" of hereditary succession. It was not a very large estate, but it was large enough to entitle its owner to rank as one of the county gentlemen—to give him a seat on the magisterial bench, and to have supported large families in ease and comfort, if not in luxury, for many generations. Consequently, though I was an orphan, and had no property of my own, my lines were cast in pleasant places, and the world seemed a very sunshiny place to me.

For two years after my mother's death, namely, from the day I was fifteen, I held the reins of government as mistress of Oaklands; and during those two years I obtained almost unlimited sway over my brother Philip. Whatever "Miss Lisle wished" became a law, and I used my privileges to the points of abusing them very often, in my giddy reliance on his love for me, and my own powers of keeping that love unchanged.

My first grief was my brother's marriage. It seemed to me so hard that he should want another love than mine, while I was fully contented with his. It appeared such a horrible injustice to me that another—and that other a girl only two years older than myself—should step over my head and assume the sceptre of command at Oaklands. When Philip broke it to me first, that he was going to marry Gertrude Barnet, I laughed at the idea, in my utter unbelief of such a misalliance, as I considered it,—Gertrude Barnet, to whom I had condescended at the dancing-class in my school-days, in the old cathedral town where I had been educated,—Gertrude Barnet, whose father I frequently referred to with contemptuous pity as a "poor country apothecary,"—that my brother—*my* brother, Philip Lisle of Oaklands—should be going to marry such a girl, appeared to me incredible at first.

But at last he made me understand that it was

really going to be so, and then I burst into a flood of passionate tears.

"Her mother is the most vulgar old woman I ever met in my life," I sobbed out; "how can you endure her?"

"I am not going to marry her mother, Ethel dear," he said; "besides, Mrs. Barnet is a good old soul—"

"Yes, but good old souls are very much out of place at Oaklands," I interrupted. "Our washerwoman is a good old soul, and so is Barrett the butcher's wife, but I hardly think of putting them in the place that those people" (I pointed as I spoke to several portraits of our female ancestors that adorned the walls) "have occupied."

"Gertrude won't disgrace the position," he said, trying to speak lightly; but I saw that I had stung his pride and wounded his feelings. "She is as true a lady as any of those you point to with such pride."

"She has been horribly sly to get you to make her an offer," I said, indignantly; "how has she managed it, Philip? how have they trapped you into this?"

He took my hands in his, and pulled me towards him, and kissed me.

"I was afraid you would not like my tidings, Ethel, but I did not fear that you would become violent and unjust; you must not speak of my future wife in such a way."

"Your future wife! your future wife!" I reiterated. "So it is all settled; is there no appeal? Oh, Philip, I wanted you to marry Miss Manners so much—and you might if you liked. Fancy having Mr. Barnet for a father-in-law instead of Lord Manners!"

"Mr. Barnet is an upright man with a stainless character; Lord Manners is a profligate old sinner—"

"But he's a peer," I interrupted.

"'An honest man is the noblest work of God,'" he quoted. "Come, Ethel, I should have thought you're own pride would have taught you that a Lisle need not marry to aggrandise his position."

"Supposing I take up with the young apothecary, John Barnet," I said, looking at him and smiling through my tears.

"I was speaking of the men of our family, not the women," he said, more coldly than he had ever spoken to me before.

"In fact, you'd make one law for the goose and another for the gander," I said, pertly. "Well, don't be afraid, Phil; I am not at all inclined to marry John Barnet—or any one else beneath me, for that matter. What is to become of me, then?"

"When?"

"When you are married," I gulped out, in such evident emotion, that it touched him to tenderness again.

"My darling child, what are you thinking of?" he said lovingly; "here is your home, and here it will be till you go to a brighter one of your own. Gertrude will love you as dearly as I do."

"That's fiddle-de-dee," I thought to myself; "I have never done much to win Miss Gertrude's love, and I shall not try to do much now;" nevertheless, though I thought this, I had a sufficient sense of the fitness of things to say no more that was openly antagonistic to the girl my brother was going to marry.

He had made his communication to me just before dinner one night, and we had speedily been obliged to drop the subject, for we always dined in great state at Oaklands, with a butler and two footmen in attendance upon us, whose presence forbade the discussion of any private topics. I ate my dinner with a very full heart that night. I could not help wondering how soon I should be called upon to surrender my seat at the head of the table; and the vision I kept conjuring up of Gertrude Barnet in my prized place almost made me sick.

After dinner, almost as soon as we were alone again, he reverted to the subject in a matter-of-course tone.

"By-the-way, Ethel, what time will you call at the Barnets' to-morrow?"

"Call at the Barnets'!" I repeated after him in tones of genuine surprise.

"Yes, call on Gertrude, I mean."

"Oh, well," I said, towering myself and facing the inevitable, "any time you like;" and from that moment I *outwardly* resigned myself to the prospect, hideous as it was.

The following day, after luncheon, I dressed myself as plainly as possible and drove myself in my own pony-chaise down to Bodalaning, the little town in which the Barnets lived. My brother had tried to induce me to have the carriage and pair, but I was resolved to do as little honour as I could to the Barnets. And so I went down in a plain morning-dress, and a hat that I wore about the grounds.

I had often stopped at the Barnets' door to leave baskets of fruit, and flowers, and vegetables, but I had never called on them before. The vulgarity of the exterior of the house had always been patent to me, but never so patent as it was this day. I loathed it all, from the shiny brass knocker, and the bright green railing that guarded the spotless white steps, to the odious wire blinds, with flaring-painted flowers upon them, that screened the windows. My face flushed painfully, and my eyes swam with tears as I got out and knocked at the door, and felt miserably certain that every one in this little gossiping town who saw me would know why I was there. "Oh, Phil! Phil!" I thought, "you have not only done for yourself, but for me. What man of position, such us I could marry, would like to mix himself up with this connection?" Then my soliloquy was cut short by the door being opened by a bare-elbowed maid-servant, and the next moment I was fairly launched in the bosom of the Barnet family.

I *was* justified in my denunciations of Mrs. Barnet's vulgarity. The moment I caught sight of that excellent housewife, I told myself that she was even more utterly unfit than I had previously

imagined to be the grandmother of a generation of Lisles.

She was evidently expectant of, and thoroughly prepared for, my visit. Indeed, her preparations were so palpable that they grated on my fine tastes at every turn. The glaring, sunny room into which I was ushered was rigidly arranged as to the chairs and tables. A tall camellia—a natural plant with a lot of paper flowers tied on to it—stood on one side of the window, and an elaborately-displayed wool-work frame formed a pendant to the plant on the other side; books were placed at regular intervals all round the centre table, and the room altogether had that awful look of unoccupation which is so depressing to the soul of the chance guest.

"Can this be the arrangement of my future sister-in-law?" I thought, as I tried to respond affably to Mrs. Barnet's greeting. Mrs. Barnet seemed to me a very fitting occupant for this chamber of plebeian horrors, and a very unfitting companion for my own aristocratic self. How I have smarted for those thoughts of mine since that day when I stood there in all the panoply of my untoward, unbending pride!

The mother of the lady who was to be the mistress of Oaklands was a short, stout, red-faced woman of fifty. There was a good deal of bright good humour in her eyes and voice and manner; but, overlying the good-humour, there was a repulsive degree of satisfaction with herself and her own belongings that was infinitely trying and provoking to me under the circumstances.

"Well, my dear Miss Lisle, I'm glad to see you, though such a 'ot day it is. How ever you could get over from Oaklands at this hour is a marvel to me," she began volubly.

"My call is on your daughter," I said, as quietly as I could. For my brother's sake—for dear Phil's sake—I was determined to make the best of my unpleasant task.

"Ah! to be sure," she said complacently. "I have

been worrying Gurty all the morning, and telling her to get ready to see you, for you'd be sure to be here this afternoon; but she would go on writing her letters as cool as you please."

"Don't let me disturb Miss Barnet," I said quickly, feeling huffed at once.

"Her brother John comes before everybody, and she's finished her letter to him," Mrs. Barnet was explaining, when the door opened, and Gertrude came into the room.

I had not seen her for a long time, though she was such a near neighbour; for she had, it seemed, lived closely, and kept much within the walls of her home since her school-days were over. My recollections were of a good-looking, plump girl, with pretty gray eyes, and a pale, rather bad complexion: I saw before me now a gracefully, graciously-formed, beautiful young woman, with an air of splendid languor about her that was evidently perfectly natural—with a great deal of repose in her gray hazel eyes, and a grand composure in her manner, that made me, Ethel Lisle, feel very young and unformed, and at a disadvantage altogether. Additionally, a sensation of utter bewilderment sets in: How could she be the daughter of her mother? All at once I felt that I could forgive my brother for having lost his heart and plighted his troth to this imperial-looking girl, and, simultaneously, I felt shocked with myself for not having done more honour to the occasion in my costume. She was dressed with a dainty, quiet elegance that became her beauty well, and I felt nervously afraid, for a moment or two, that she would think me, Miss Lisle of Oaklands, ignorant of what was correct.

I had come there, meaning to be kind, but patronizingly kind, and she made me feel clearly, in the first minute of our intercourse, that she would have none of my patronage. She gave me a sweet smile and a pretty hand—"quite a lady's hand," I remarked approvingly, as I stammered out a few words expressive of good-will and congratulation.

"Is Philip coming over to-day?" she asked quietly.

"Yes," I said.

"Tell him not to come after five," she said deliberately, "for at five my brother will arrive, and I shall have to tell him my news—he does not know it yet, of course—and I can't introduce the fact of my engagement, and the man I'm engaged to, to John at the same moment."

"I thought you were writing to John," Mrs. Barnet said sharply.

"So I have been, but see this telegram!—it has just reached me; John will here be at five.—If you are half as fond of your brother as I am of mine," she continued, addressing me, "you'll hate me for taking up a bit of his heart."

"Your brother does not live with you," I said, for want of something better to say.

She smiled. "No, he lives in London, where he is making a great name for himself among men—"

"As what?" I interrupted, rather superciliously.

"As a writer," she replied, quietly.

I was impressed with her—with the lovely woman who had won Philip Lisle of Oaklands—but I was not much impressed at this epoch with her mention of her brother.

"So he is a person who writes," I said afterwards, when I was in conversation with my brother about the Barnets. "Gertrude seems to be very fond of him."

"Very fond of him and very proud of him," my brother replied, curtly. And I elevated my eyebrows, and said, "Oh, really!" in my most superior tone.

Well, to cut a long story short, my brother Philip married very soon after this, and beautiful Mrs. Lisle speedily contrived to make the most fastidious people forget that she had sprung from the middle classes. She conquered us all at Oaklands very quickly, and I, for one, held my tongue about misalliances when I came to know, not only her, but her brother.

John Barnet had acted as groomsman to Philip, and I, as first bridesmaid, had fallen to his share.

"We are to appropriate each other for the whole of this day, are we not?" he had said to me when he was offering me his arm after the marriage was over; "shall we make the best of so hard a fate?"

I looked up at him, half astonished at his presumption in calling the fate that linked him to me a hard one; and he met my eyes with such a frank, winning smile, that I was subjugated at once. All thoughts of my assumed social superiority to this member of the Barnet family vanished from that hour, and it soon became evident, to myself at least, that I had given my heart away without sufficient cause.

Without sufficient cause? Alas! infatuated as I rapidly became, I could not delude myself with the idea that the man who had so completely won my love had sought it at all. He was very kind to me, very open in showing his admiration for the bright young beauty that I was endowed with in those days. But he did not love me, and he did not try to make me love him.

But, in spite of my full knowledge of this fact, I did love him desperately. He was quite a new type of man to me, who had only been accustomed to the rather sombre excellences and rather stolid intellects of the country gentlemen round about Oaklands. He was a man who had made his mark in literature—the stamp of success was upon him, and success is always appreciated by a young woman. I read his imaginative efforts in three volumes; I read his graceful rendering of facts in the "leaders" of a well-known daily paper, one of whose "young lions" he was openly avowed to be. I read paragraphs concerning his forthcoming works, and columns of criticism on those that were already born, until I believed that he combined in his own person all the best mental gifts of Dickens, Macaulay, and Carlyle.

Moreover, this hero whom I worshipped was a very handsome man, and there was about him all the

brightness of that London life which he led. What wonder that I was dazzled? what wonder that I kindled into fresh life when he was present, and faded away into inactivity and dulness, and despair almost, when he was absent? what wonder that at last my brother's wife detected my secret, since I guarded it no better than the majority of girls do guard such things.

I suppose she told him. I believe that she pressed upon him the advantages of such a connection; that she painted in glowing terms the good that would accrue to him from such a further linking together of the fortunes of the two families. I believe that she tempted him, and that she fed the vanity from which no man is free, by pointing out my love for him, and, as he was heart-free then, such arguments naturally had their weight. At any rate, one day all the world seemed full of sunshine, for John Barnet asked me to be his wife.

My brother gave, what I thought, a cold and hesitating consent to my engagement, and Gertrude expressed herself much hurt that Philip should not more readily have recognised John's claims. But, in spite of Philip's devotion to his wife's lightest wishes on ordinary occasions, he would not now be brought to say more than he "hoped things would turn out better than he expected."—"It's one-sided at present," I heard him say to Gertrude one morning, and I shrank from even trying to fathom his meaning.

My brief engagement was a very bright one, John staying at Oaklands for three months, until the end of May; and it was settled that we were to be married in July. The whole of June he had arranged to spend in London, for he had a novel coming out, and he wanted to see it through the press. I exacted several little promises from him before he left Oaklands. He was to write to me twice a week, and send me every notice, good and bad, of his book. And he was not to work too hard; and he was to be very particular about there being a conservatory attached to the house

that he was going to take at Kensington—the house that was to be my first married home.

For a fortnight I heard from him regularly enough. Then there was a break in the correspondence which made me anxious; and then there came a letter from him that failed to set my anxieties at rest. There was nothing in the actual words to make me unhappy, but a tired strain breathed throughout the epistle; and there was an air of effort about it that made my heart sore. He was staying with his publisher a little way out of London, he said, and they were all very kind and sympathetic about "No Respite," the name of his new novel.

After this letter there was another blank in the correspondence, and then, one morning, there came a letter addressed to Gertrude, instead of to me. I saw her turn very red and then very pale, as she read it, and at once I felt that there was bad news in store for me.

"Is John ill?" I asked, as calmly as I could.

She shook her head.

"No, not ill." Then she rose up and went out of the room, casting an imploring look at Philip, who followed her, leaving me alone.

I sat for an hour looking out at the waving trees and the blooming roses, at the bright sunshine and the blue bloom of summer heat that was over everything; and, as I looked, I caught myself wondering whether it could be possible that the beldame Sorrow was so near to me, that I might never hope to look on such things with pleasure again.

At last I could bear the suspense no longer, and I went away in search of my brother and his wife.

She was sitting with her face buried in her hands, crying bitterly, as I had never seen Gertrude cry before; and Philip had the open letter before him.

"I am come to know what it is," I said, going up to my brother; "I can bear anything but being left in suspense. Is he dead?"

"No; he is quite well."

"Is he married?" and I could not repress the shudder that made the last word almost inarticulate.

"No; but he is false to you!" Philip thundered out, and Gertrude took her hands from before her face, and held them out in piteous deprecation to her husband's wrath against her brother.

Then, by degrees, the whole truth was made known to me. John wrote with the keenest self-reproach, with the utmost contrition of what he had done, and what he was going to do; but he wrote with decision also.

"You overpowered my judgment when you induced me to offer Ethel a love-regard in return for the great honour and boon of her pure young love," he wrote; "I hoped that in time I should come to love her as she deserved; but it has been brotherly all through, nothing warmer. And now that my eyes have been opened by the sight of a woman I adore, I dare not do Ethel the further wrong of marrying her."

As I read these words, the letter fell from my feeble hand and fluttered down to the floor, and I gasped out,—

"Who is this woman?"

"His publisher's daughter—a Miss Maynard," Philip said. "Come, Ethel, be my own darling brave sister; banish him from your mind—he will be that other woman's husband in a few weeks."

"So soon?"

"Yes, so soon; it is as well, too, that it should be soon; when you feel that there is sin in it, you will cease to think of him with tenderness." Then Philip kissed me, and my love-dream was over.

I am Ethel Lisle still, though it is just ten years ago that the roses of life faded for me on that fair June day, and I am happy and contented in the exercise of those duties which fall to my share as maiden aunt to Philip's children.

Of his wife I have seen many portraits, and heard much. She is a beautiful, imperial-looking woman,

and she has made a very good wife to John Barnet. Sometimes I almost yearn to see the person who has superseded me.

Since writing the above, my wish, that was not quite a wish, has been gratified most painfully and unexpectedly. John Barnet is dead—"broken down from overwork," men say, and, out of all the large sums that he made by his pen, the merest pittance has been secured to his widow and children. His creditors have swallowed up everything, and, for the time, she and her helpless little ones have found an asylum at Oaklands.

I am happier than I have been for years, for my fortune is in my own hands, and I am going to share it with the wife and children who were so dear to the man I loved.

THE BAR OF GOLD.

GERALD ADAIR had lived a very useless, careless, selfish life for many years; but until after he had met with Violet Leigh he had never committed anything that could be stigmatised as a crime, either by the best or the most censorious of men. After that meeting it would have been hard for the most lenient or the most lax to pronounce him inoffensive any more.

The meeting took place in this wise:—Down in the luxuriant, ferny depths of South Devon a richly-wooded and watered gorge, between two boldly-rising lines of hills, had been made the scene of a picnic that had been organised on a colossal scale by a couple of the best known and best liked people in the neighbourhood. The place was a very picnic-suggesting one; and when Mr. and Mrs. Arbuthnot filled their house with worn-out fashionable people at the end of the London season, it (the place) naturally occurred to them as one that might be set as the stage for the enactment of one of those diversions which were absolutely necessary for the diverting of the already sated pleasure seekers.

"We must have a picnic at Ivy Bridge among other

things," Mrs. Arbuthnot had said; while stretching out a programme that was ordained to be "elastic" from the first. She made this suggestion in the presence of Mr. Adair the morning after that gentleman's arrival at Glade, and somehow or other he made his silent disapprobation manifest to her.

"Why don't you cordially indorse instead of mutely scorning my plan, wretched man?" the young hostess asked, laughingly.

"Briefly, because I abhor picnics," he answered.

"Why?"

"The girls pursue their flirtations too remorselessly at them; the food suffers from the transit and gets fœtid; the wine is hot; the attitude in which these unpromising things are consumed is impossible."

"Those are all silly groundless complaints that have been levelled against the time-honoured institution a thousand times, and refuted. I expected something more original from you," Mrs. Arbuthnot said.

"Refute them now. I will be easily convinced since you wish it."

"Well," she said, laughing, "the majority of the girls who will be at our picnic are too pretty to need to pursue flirtation. Your wine shall be as well iced as if you were dining at home; and the hampers shall not disgrace Gunter or Fortnum and Mason. Don't be absurd—go and enjoy it, and confess to me afterward that Violet Leigh would have made all the evils even you sketched out acceptable."

"Who is Violet Leigh?" he asked.

"She is the most perfectly lovely girl it has ever been my lot to meet," Mrs. Arbuthnot—who was by way of being a beauty herself—said, warmly.

"Ah!" he said, with his most insufferable air, "I don't like your country beauties."

Mrs. Arbuthnot suppressed her impatience. "I will tell you who she is," she said. "You shall then say what you imagine her to be. She is the only daughter of the late Sir Aymott Leigh—a careless, improvident

man, as you know; for even you may own to having heard of Sir Aymott without loss of caste. He left Violet penniless, but she has been adopted by the Vincents, old friends of her father's; and rumour says she is the richest heiress in the county. You needn't turn up your nose at her; she is the belle of every place at which she appears; she caused a sensation in Paris last year."

"So she tells you, I suppose," he said, laughing.

"So she doesn't tell me, scoffer, but so I happen to know. Now picture her."

"Thanks; but the remuneration of being right would be too slight a one," he said, carelessly. "However, I will go to your picnic, not to be charmed with Miss Violet Leigh, but because you desire me to do so."

Kate Arbuthnot laughed. It was a well-understood thing among them all that Mr. Adair's spoken flatteries and open adoration of her meant nothing. Her husband liked the man. "Not that I know any good of him," Mr. Arbuthnot would say; "but, on the other hand, I don't know any harm of him, you see; and he likes Kate, and Kate can keep any fellow from liking her too much." This being the state of the case, Mr. Adair was willing enough to bury himself in the solitudes of Glade much more frequently than in any other of his numerous country haunts. He was even willing to go the length of attending that which most London men who have passed their "salad days" would most sedulously eschew — namely, a country picnic—for the sake of pleasing his fair, pleasant hostess. The lady smiled a smile of gratified acquiescence now. "After all, why should you feign to be above most things, and weary of the rest?" she said. "I don't believe you to be either, remember; but the great majority accept your own estimate of yourself, and think that you are sated with pleasure and saddened with thought."

"Decidedly I am not sated with pleasure," he said.

"Are you saddened with thought? No, I don't believe it, Mr. Adair."

"I do think sometimes, though you think me incapable of the effort, I know."

"But you're on the top of the tide; you're well off, and you will be better off when your uncle dies. You're young and good-looking (you know the latter fact so well that I needn't scruple to mention it to you). You're tolerably clever, and you have no wife to worry you."

"Yet a wife is the very thing you are always advising me to take. What other motive, for instance, have you in putting Miss Leigh in my path?"

"Yes, I should like you to take her," Mrs. Arbuthnot said. "A wife like Violet, but not any wife."

"What day do you say your picnic is to be?" he said, suddenly.

"Next Wednesday."

"Ah! a thousand pities that business should call me away on Tuesday," he said.

"Now, Mr. Adair, you are trying to trifle with me; and I won't have it. Ivy Bridge is a charming place. If you don't like the actors, you will approve of the stage and the scenery. I won't say another word about Violet Leigh to you. I won't even introduce her to you. You shall be free as air to neglect my beauty; but you shall go to my picnic."

So it came to be an understood thing (during the interval that elapsed between this conversation and the picnic) among all Mrs. Arbuthnot's intimates that Mr. Adair was staying for the picnic as a favour, and that the favour was a very great one. Violet Leigh heard of it from a mutual friend of hers and Mrs. Arbuthnot's, and Violet Leigh derided the idea.

"A favour; why should it be a favour? What is there in the man that Kate makes herself absurd about him?"

"Kate, and her husband too, think him brilliant and clever, and an acquisition to any set," the friend replied.

"Do they? I never do like the Admirable Crichtons that are discovered by my friends; I hope Kate won't expect me to go into similar ecstasies over him, and to regard his dancing with me as a great favour."

Thus it appeared almost as if the two whom Mrs. Arbuthnot had designed the picnic for, in the hope that each would be as much struck with the other as she was with them both respectively, were prejudiced against each other from the very first.

Wednesday, the day of the picnic, dawned broiling, bright, and beautiful as it is possible for a July day in South Devon to be. The trysting-place was a well-known inn in the heart of the country town, just opposite to the ivy-covered bridge which gives its name to the place. Here the guests who had been assembled by Mrs. Arbuthnot met, and held a consultation as to where they should wander and when they should dine. When this last important matter was definitely fixed upon, that ardent search after the picturesque which characterises most picnics commenced—a search which apparently can only be properly conducted in pairs.

The picturesque does not render the search after itself difficult in the region round about Ivy Bridge. In the first place there is the river Erme, which comes rolling down from Dartmoor, over boulders that are like polished marble when looked at through the crystal water—rolling down over boulders and between high banks, fringed with trees and shrubs and ferns in matchless profusion and endless variety. No sweeter place for a stroll than the banks of this shaded stream can be found in the whole of this nature-favoured district. And if the quiet, secluded beauty palls upon one, a short, tough ascent brings one to the broad, bold, breezy border of Dartmoor, which civilisation has left untouched and untainted as yet.

One of the last to arrive was Violet Leigh. She came up driving a pair of handsome small chestnut cobs, driving fast and cleverly, for she was to be chaperoned by her hostess, and she feared being late. Mr.

Adair was standing by Mrs. Arbuthnot's side as the young lady checked her cobs, and leaned forward to excuse herself for the delay she fancied she had caused. "I was afraid you would have started for the woods," she said, "and that I should have enacted the part of unprotected young lady all day."

"Why were you not more punctual?" asked Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"You know I am not mistress of my own time, nor yet of my own actions," the girl answered, hastily, and Gerald Adair looked at her with interest for the first time.

She was worth looking at. She was—he longed to openly confess that she was—utterly different to his preconceived notions of the country beauty and heiress. A graceful, elegant, thorough-bred looking girl, with a world of quiet, courtly self-possession in her air. Slender in figure, exquisitely dressed, pale and fair complexioned, with soft masses of wavy brown hair dressed far forward, nearly on to her wide brow in front of her chignon. A delicate, slightly aquiline-featured face, with dark violet eyes fringed with silky, curly black lashes. A very lovely young lady, "but something better than lovely, too," he told himself. "She might be a peeress in her own right, indeed, to judge by her looks."

True to her promise, Mrs. Arbuthnot made no attempt to introduce Mr. Adair to Miss Leigh; and he felt half annoyed with his favourite friend on account of that strict observance of her word on which she was secretly priding herself. "They are the two best adapted to each other in all the party," she thought; and it serves them both right that I treat them according to the letter of their request." This was the thought that flashed through her mind before they started for the ante-dinner stroll. By the time the post-dinner was imminent Mr. Adair lowered his flag.

"I wish you would make me known to Miss Leigh," he said, quietly.

"You're not asking this to please me?" the gratified little matron asked.

"No, indeed; entirely to please myself," he answered. "She shines like a star amidst all these people you have collected. What wonder that I desire to have her shine upon me alone!"

"I wish I had the strength of mind to punish such selfish conceit by refusing your request; as I haven't —Violet, allow me to introduce our friend, Mr. Adair, to you; I want you to make him comprehend this truth—that my picnic was worth waiting for."

Miss Leigh smiled rather languidly; rather too languidly, Mr. Adair thought, as their hostess moved away.

"A man convinced against his will, etc.," she quoted presently. "Why should I attempt, moreover, to upset what is perhaps a pet theory of yours? You like to imagine yourself superior to this sort of thing; why should I try to prove to you that you are not?"

"You have proved it to me already," he said, adroitly guiding her into a path that none of the others had taken. And Mrs. Arbuthnot, keenly glancing after them, felt happy when she saw them disappear round a corner together, alone.

A fortnight after this they were alone with each other once more. By this time, though, being with each other had become the one thing in the whole world to them. During this fortnight Mr. Adair had pursued Violet incessantly, "madly" even, Mrs. Arbuthnot called it in joke—"madly," the man felt it to be in reality. He was born to attract women. His normal *insouciance* and frequent earnestness won upon, flattered, bothered, and beguiled them. He was handsome, accomplished, well-bred. The graceful beauty, the Queen of Calm, as she had been called, surrendered to him after a brief struggle. She could not suppress the slight flush which would rise to her cheeks, and the slight throbbing which would affect her heart, when he approached her. And, as for him, there seemed to be

nothing of exaggeration in the impassioned words which he was addressing to her now as she sat embowered in flowers in a deep bay-window in Mrs. Arbuthnot's drawing-room:

"'Thou wast all that to me, love,
For which my soul did pine—
A green isle in the sea, love,
A fountain and a shrine,
All wreathed about with flowers,
And all the flowers were mine.'

"*Are* all the flowers mine?" he continued, passionately. "Tell me! No other man has forced such roses as these into bloom?" and he lightly touched her cheek with a sprig of myrtle as he spoke.

"No other man has ever said such words to me. I should never have listened to them," she said, softly. He was going to leave Glade on the morning of the next day, and Violet was feeling so sure in her love and happiness; so sure that he would not go without asking her to be his wife.

Suddenly, to her surprise, he half knelt at her side. Suddenly, to her horror, he breathed an anathema against that fatal picnic party.

"What is it, Gerald?" she said, in a whisper. It was the first time she had ever called him by his Christian name. At the same time she put her hand down and touched his hand.

"Violet," he said, grasping hers fiercely and firmly; "how will your dear eyes look at me after this day? How will your dear voice ever name me?"

"Always kindly," she said, trembling a little.

"No, no; you will despise and disown me, as I deserve. I know what you, what any woman must expect—would be wrong and unwomanly not to expect, in fact. I ought to ask you to be my wife to-day. I would give my life to be able to do it, and I dare not!"

"Oh, Gerald! why?"

All her pride and stately sweet grace were gone as she rang out the piteous entreaty. She felt so sure of

his love. There must be some hideous mistake in all this!

"There is a bar between us, darling," he said, looking up, miserably.

"A bar! What bar? No bar strong enough to keep us asunder," she said, impetuously.

"A little bar of gold—a wedding-ring. I have a wife already!"

"For all that my eyes will never look, or my voice never name you less kindly than they have already done," she said, recovering her sweet, outward calm, but feeling her heart to be wounded, broken, bleeding.

"You do not reproach me, Miss Leigh," he said, rising to his feet.

"Reproach you! We must not reproach each other, say rather. Tell me of your wife before I go; and I go, must go soon."

Then he told her how he had been inveigled into marrying a woman older than himself while he was still a mere boy. "She was beautiful then," he said; "but she was not a woman I may dare to talk to you about. I never respected her. I never loved her after the first few days of mad passion were over. I have disliked her for years; but I never so loathed her as I do now that she stands between me and you, the brightest vision in my life."

"Why do you not live with her?" Violet asked, with more of sternness than he had ever heard in her tones before. "Why do you neglect her, and go about under false colours, feigning to be a free man, when you are—"

"A very bond slave," he interrupted. "Why do I do it? This is why; I have it in me (so you have told me more than once) to be a good and great and useful man. She does not know my heart—she does not care for it."

"Have you any children?" Violet said, shortly.

"One child only, thank Heaven."

"What is it—boy or girl?"

"A girl; she's about ten years old, by-the-way."

"You have a daughter, and you can treat her mother as you do; I told you just now that I forgave you freely all I had to forgive you," she said, blushing. "I can not now, while I think you have no heart for your daughter. What is her name, and where is she?"

"Her name is Beatrix; she is at school at St. Leonard's. Don't look harshly at me, Violet; if it ever comes out that I have a wife—*such* a wife as I have, and a child—I shall cease to be my uncle's heir."

"And that is your whole fear," she said. "I can't bear to think it. Do you not dread that your child may grow up careless of you; that she may turn out badly from sheer parental neglect? You ought to be her guide, her friend, her protector. Think of it; she is your own flesh and blood, Gerald." And as she pleaded for his child Violet Leigh burst into tears.

An hour after, when Mrs. Arbuthnot came home from her drive to dress for dinner, she found a note from Violet Leigh, instead of seeing the happy face of the girl whose love-dream had seemed to be so near realization.

"DEAR KATE"—Violet wrote—"I have gone home instead of staying to dine, as I rashly promised you I would do; don't ask any questions of Mr. Adair, or make any jokes about me; we have had an explanation, and it has ended in our saying good-bye, and wishing each God-speed. Your affectionate.

"VIOLET."

"My affectionate Violet might have been a little more explicit with me, I think," Mrs. Arbuthnot said, musingly. "I should like to ask him what it all means; but she asks me not to do so." Still, though her loyalty to her friend forbade her asking any questions that that friend had forbidden, her curiosity was sorely taxed.

Nor was it set at rest by Gerald Adair's telling her that evening that his farewell on the morrow would be a long one. "I am going abroad," he said.

"For how long?"

"For an indefinite period; before I go I ask this one favour of you. Here is the address of my agent in town; he will always know where or whereabout I am. If Miss Leigh marries, write to me through him and tell me. Will you?"

Still wrestling with her curiosity, Mrs. Arbuthnot promised.

"And give this note to Miss Leigh when I am gone," he said; "it contains an address she wants. I shall say good-bye to you to-night," he added, holding out his hand.

"My picnic was fatal to you both," she whispered; and he bowed his head and went out of the room.

For the next eight years Violet Leigh alternately puzzled and annoyed all her best friends by refusing to marry. She had many brilliant offers—a woman is only at her best until eight or nine and twenty, and her beauty was unimpaired. Her self-elected guardian grew morose and gloomy with her. "Don't call me his heiress," she would say sometimes to Mrs. Arbuthnot; "if I were only sure of being that I should act very differently. I would fulfil the object of my life then —now I can not do it."

At last, when Violet was a splendid woman of thirty, she married. The man she married was a rich, honourable gentleman of ancient family, a man many years older than herself. Mrs. Arbuthnot, true to her promise, wrote to Gerald Adair, who was away on his travels again, although he had been in England many times since he had asked her to do it. Soon afterward Violet, now Mrs. Fanshawe, came back to her own home with her own husband, accompanied by a young lady whom she introduced to the neighbourhood as the daughter of her old friend Mr. Adair, and her own adopted child.

Gradually the whole story oozed out. Mrs. Adair was dead long ago, and for years Violet Leigh had played the part of mother and guardian to the child of her old love. She had always refused to marry, be-

cause objections had always been raised on the part of her guardian and her lovers to any permanent settlement being made on the daughter of her heart. At last, in wrath, her guardian vowed that, unless she gave up this "mad fancy," as he called it, he would leave the money he had intended for her to some one else. She could not give up that which she had won hardly from Gerald Adair—the right to protect and watch over his child. Even while she was debating what it was best to do Mr. Fanshawe proposed to her, and she told him her trouble.

"Marry me, and she shall be in all respects as a daughter of our own," he said; and his acceptance of Violet's "mad fancy" made her guardian look more leniently upon it. So the end of it was that Beatrix Adair was well-dowered and well-received when, some ten years after that fatal picnic, her father came once again to Glade.

He longed to see her—not to see his child, but to see the woman who was to her as a mother. He had never ceased to love her, he had never forgotten her graceful beauty. But she struck him afresh with a strong sense of her superiority when he did see her after these long years. She was a splendid woman, and his eyes flashed and his heart beat at the sight of beauty as warmly now as in his younger days. Her husband was old; she could not love him, Gerald Adair felt sure. He saw her once, twice, thrice, approaching her, as it were, more nearly each time. He could not understand why, having loved him once so well, she had made no sign when his wife died. A few words would have brought him to her side then, though in his careless way he had not deemed it worth his while to come without them. Above all, why had she married an old man like Fanshawe? He determined to ask her these questions as soon as possible.

One morning he rode over to the Fanshawes, and found the beautiful châtelaine alone in her morning-room. She was looking more splendid than ever, he

thought—the sort of woman who would never grow old and wearisome. For a time she talked to him of Beatrix; but the subject of Beatrix did not interest him now—he wanted to speak of Violet and himself.

"Did you know that I was in England when Beatrix's mother died?" he asked.

"Yes; I heard of you from Mrs. Arbuthnot when your wife died."

"Yet you never wrote to me," he said, reproachfully.

"It would have been a mockery for me to write condolences," she said.

"I did not mean condolences," he said, impatiently; "there were other words that you might have written then—words of hope and encouragement."

For his daughter's sake she—the married woman—was patient with him, though her pride and her anger were rising.

"Those words could not have gone from me to you," she said, calmly.

"Mrs. Fanshawe—Violet, tell me why you kept true to me so long only to marry at last," he said, passionately.

She rose up and gravely faced him. "I was true to my self-imposed charge, your child," she said, earnestly.

"I would not marry till I could make her independent of the neglect and scorn and contumely to which her father's neglect subjected her. This" (holding up her wedding-ring) "was put upon my hand by the same one that dowered your daughter; it tells me that all intercourse must cease between us, if I am to go on trying to teach Beatrix to love and respect her father; it is a bar of gold between me and such questioning as you have forced upon me. You shall not come to my husband's house now that you have disregarded my husband's claims."

"You are harsher to me than when I nearly broke your heart," he muttered.

"And I promised never to look less kindly or speak less kindly to you than I did then," she said. "You

have forced me to break that promise; but this bar of gold will prevent your ever doing it again." Then she said good-bye to him, and went away feeling that he had been a hero to her once, and that this was a hard truth which had come home to her—namely, that each time he had wrung her heart and hurt her, it had been through idleness and selfishness.

MY TWO LOVES.

I AM a man of thirty-five now, at the time of my writing this, and I venture to start with a bold statement of only wanting five years of those "forty" which sensibly suggest to us that we have done with romance and deal solely with realities, though the romance of my life is but just commencing.

Yet, on looking back sometimes, it seems such a very short time since I—a young fellow of twenty-three—met my first love. She gave me my first experience of the tender passion, and during all the twelve years that have passed, I have only known one other.

It may be gathered from this that I was not what is called an "impressionable" youth or man, and this deduction is a correct one. Brought up as a boy at the feet of a couple of maiden aunts, who were dull, dictatorial, and distressingly plain, I saw nothing in their sex to make their "looks my only books." Nor had I any strong revulsion of feeling in favour of them when, after my college career had come to an end, I went to live with my bachelor uncle, Mr. Jocelyn, an old country squire, to whose lands and money I was heir.

The living beauties of Jocelyn Court were not

dangerous to the peace of mind of any man—unless he was led to back them heavily in any of the respective contests on which they entered. They were all well-born, thorough-bred, and perfect in point of personal appearance. But the sentimental heart of man never knew a pang through one of them, for they were all four-footed.

The horses in the stalls, and the hounds in the kennels, the red Devons in the pastures, and the sheep upon the hills, were each and all unrivalled in that county-side. But no man grudged the possession of such excellence to popular, generous old Mark Jocelyn, for the hounds were kept up at his own expense, and no careful, clever rider ever lacked a "mount" from the Jocelyn Court stables.

I had been living with my uncle about six months, when I first began to experience a slight sensation of discontent with the manner of my existence. I had shot away the Autumn, and hunted away the Winter, and now Spring, with all its tender, relaxing influences had set in, and I began to feel dull.

The house was always full of staying visitors, and a large dinner-party once a week was a standing invitation; but the guests were all men, and all men of my uncle's generation. Hard, heavy-headed old sportsmen, who rode gallantly up to hounds still, but who were rather shaky as to the voice and legs after dinner; first-rate fellows to follow if you wanted a good lead over the country, but rather dreary to pursue through the involutions of their oft-told tales of adventure over field and stubble.

I had learnt the country pretty well during the hunting, but then I had looked upon it merely with sporting eyes. It bore quite another aspect now that the crops had sprung, and the hedges were full of flowers and ferns, and I tried to develop an interest in its new aspect, and to amuse myself by working in ignorance in the formation of a new fernery.

The work did not progress very rapidly; for some

days I forgot to bring home any specimen, and on other occasions those I did bring home were broken, withered, and mutilated, or were worthless weeds. However, fern-hunting gave me nominal occupation, and so I pursued it in a desultory way in the intervals of fly-fishing and otter-hunting.

One day I found myself a long distance from home, riding slowly along a little, narrow, high-hedged lane, which was rich in ferns, that even to my inexperienced eye were both beautiful and rare. I was just making up my mind lazily to dismount and secure a root or two, when my eyes lighted upon an object a short distance ahead of me, which by some magical law drew me on toward it at once.

It was only a girl!

But such a girl! I can see her now vividly, after the lapse of all these years, as clearly as I saw her then. A slender, supple young figure, every line of which was distinctly traced by the well-fitting blue cloth habit; a small, shapely head, crowned by a neat little riding-hat, from underneath the brim of which some glossy, closely-braided chestnut hair peeped; and such a face!

Every lover worthy of the name of one thinks his mistress's face perfection, and I was her lover from the instant I first looked upon her. She glanced round hastily from her occupation of tugging with her tiny hands at the strong roots of a refractory fern as the sound of my horse's hoofs fell upon her ears, and I raised my hat in involuntary admiration as a tribute to the most bewitching embodiment of all that is most charming in woman as she did so.

In the fresh, unconventional atmosphere of that sweet old country lane we came to know each other in a way that to our ignorance and innocence seemed very well indeed in the course of the half-hour's intercourse that ensued. It came about naturally enough that we should have this intercourse. As a man, I was bound to relieve her little hands of the task of

tearing up that fern by its defiant roots, and as a woman she could but gracefully acknowledge the slight obligation under which I had laid her. Her delicately-complexioned face flushed with pleasure when she saw the prize of the refractory royal fern was her own. Her soft dark brown eyes flashed out gratitude to me. Finally, when she had avowed that she "must be going home," and I had put her up in her saddle (what a feather-weight she was!), her little hand gave mine a most cordial farewell pressure as she bent her graceful head in adieu to me and slackened the rein of her high-bred little chestnut.

As she trotted out of sight, rising to the well-marked, rather long stride of her mare as easily as she breathed—as if trotting came to her by inspiration, indeed—a feeling of desolation crept over me like the ague. I had let her go away into that life of hers which had never crossed mine before, and might never cross it again, without learning who she was and where she lived. She had gone from me without leaving me the slightest clue by which I could trace her. I had wasted the precious moments which we had passed together in idle chatter about ferns and wild flowers generally, and now she was gone without leaving me the least link by which I might find her again.

For a few moments a wild fancy reigned ordering me to feel that I should be justified in riding her down and demanding her name and address; but my natural timidity soon put this fancy to flight, and I was about to remount and moodily make the best of my way home, when I saw her little glove lying by the hedge-row, where it had fallen during her struggle with the fern. Need I tell you how I seized and kissed the pretty dainty trifle? Need I say what absurd elation I felt when I found, neatly written on the inside of the gauntlet the word "Alice?" It seemed to me that in that glove I held the silken

thread which, followed, would unerringly lead me to my love.

I said nothing of my little adventure at home. Jocelyn Place was hardly the theatre for the portrayal of such emotions as were filling my breast at this epoch. Moreover, though I was quite ready to write myself down an ass, I had no great yearning to show other people that they would be justified in doing the same thing. Accordingly, I kept my own counsel, but at the same time made incessant and earnest inquiries respecting every lady who rode in the neighbourhood. To my intense chagrin and heartfelt disappointment, the summer passed away and I heard nothing of my lady of the fern.

It was not till the commencement of the hunting season, when we had a lawn-meet and breakfast and the whole hunt at Jocelyn Place, that I was roused into a state of anything like interest outside of the stables and kennel again. Dear old Uncle Mark was in great form this day. Perhaps he had upon him the presentiment that he was inaugurating a search for the last time with his famous pack; or perhaps it may have been that his family heart was gratified to find what good progress I had made in the estimation of our county neighbours since my coming to reside, just a year ago, among them. Whatever the cause, however, the effect was this—no one ever saw "old Jocelyn in finer form" than he was on the morning of this eventful day.

I have not mentioned that the usual meets were at just such a convenient distance from a garrison and naval seaport town, that the sailors were generally well represented in the field. They were rather trying, it must be admitted, to the steady-going old hunting men who never went larking over unnecessary gates, or fooling about in any way; but, still, their debonair presence added greatly to the excitement and charm of the meets in the eyes of the ladies. Whenever a new ship came in, and a new set of mighty naval

hunters performed prodigious feats of valour and indiscretion after Jocelyn's hounds, we were sure of having full meets, and line upon line of carriages full of the prettiest women in the neighbourhood.

"I hear that my old friend Sir Harry Lakers has just come down to hoist his flag at Weymouth. He'll be out to-day for a certainty, Archie, my boy," my uncle said to me with an exhilarating degree of satisfaction in his tones, as we stood together at the head of the long table whereon the breakfast was set.

"We shan't be able to show him much sport to-day," I responded. "These lawn-meets mean loafing about till the morning's gone, and by the time we 'find,' half the field will have to go home to dinner."

My uncle laughed.

"I think Harry Lakers will like this rather better than the stiff work we'll show him next week," he said. Then, with an exclamation of pleasure, he went forward—lugging me by the arm with him—to meet a new arrival who was just being ushered into the room.

"Welcome, old friend; let me introduce my boy, Archie Jocelyn, to you," my uncle cried out, warmly. And I found myself bowing to a fine specimen of an old naval officer, a gallant-looking, upright gentleman, with a face of bronze and eyes of honest blue. A fine old fellow of sixty-five, who was as little at home in the saddle, I saw, presently, at a glance, as an infant just born.

In the bustle and confusion of the start, I did not take any notice of two ladies on horseback just outside the hall-door, but as soon as we all began to move on, I observed that they were strangers and under the protection, apparently, of Sir Harry Lakers.

From my position about ten yards behind them I took careful stock of their seats and of the way in which they managed their high-couraged horses; and, suddenly, with a throb that amounted to a pang of joy, I recognised in one of them my lady of the fern!

She was mounted on the same breedy-looking little

chestnut in conjunction with which she had made such a pretty picture in the spring; riding the fretful, fiery mare quietly as only a woman who understands a horse's mouth can ride it, and poised squarely and lightly in her saddle.

Every tongue around me was whispering wonder as to whence she came, and every eye was bent admiringly upon her, for, though we had many daring and skilful lady riders in our hunt, we had never met with a combination of such perfect hands with a perfect seat before.

Habitual indolence, as regarded woman, supplemented now by a shyness that was new to me, held me back from riding up abreast of her and giving her the option of recognising me before I requested an introduction to her from Sir Harry Lakers.

It was pleasant, too, to study the poetry of motion as exemplified by her light, swaying figure; pleasant to think that it bid fair to be a loitering day instead of one of real hard running and work; and interesting to mark the points of contrast between herself and her lady companion.

The latter was a fine, well-built girl, square-shouldered, flat-backed, tall, and not ungraceful altogether. Her face, too, from the glimpses I caught of her profile now and again as she turned her head from side to side in animated conversation with Sir Harry and the lady on the chestnut, was that of a handsome, sparkling, fine-featured brunette. But handsome as she was, undoubtedly I found myself unable to admire the type of beauty of which she was such a good representative just then; compared with her friend, she looked too large, too sturdy, too masculine almost, as it seemed to me, and I felt no manner of interest in the speculations, which were rife around her, as to whether she could be the Miss Lakers whose reputation for beauty had preceded her.

By-and-by, when we were all waiting about on the edge of a wood, which the hounds were drawing, the

moment came for me to be made known to the two strangers.

"Let me introduce you to Lady and Miss Lakers—my old friend's nephew, Mr. Jocelyn," Sir Harry said, as he presented me to the pretty smiling women. He spoke hurriedly, for the field was moving on at the moment, and, with sailor-like impetuosity, he wanted to be well to the fore. "Come on, my dear," he added, to the brunette; we may leave Mr. Jocelyn to look after Alice, I think, as the path looks rather narrow."

My heart bounded with exultation at this proposition, and as Alice apparently was not at all loath to fall in with it, we fell back, and rode slowly on together. How I blessed fortune that she was the *Miss* Lakers whose reputation for beauty had preceded her. How grateful I felt to the other equally young woman for being the wife!

As far as sport went, it was a bad day from beginning to end, but to me it was a foretaste of Paradise. During the long hours of waiting languidly about for a "find," or of taking solitary short-cuts from one cover to another, I never left her side, and without vanity I could see that she was very glad to have me there. There was not the faintest hesitation or embarrassment in her manner of accepting me from the first as an intimate aquaintance. Nor, on the other hand, was there the slightest touch of boldness or garrison-town hardihood about it. Her simple, perfect, courteous frankness finished the process of enslaving me which her beauty had commenced. She treated me with cordiality, with a flattering, trusting kindness that made me ask myself a dozen times an hour, "What had I ever done to deserve so rich an honour?" I told her bluntly—and, perhaps, irrelevantly—what my life had been, how devoid of all feminine influence, how ignorant of all feminine power of the purest highest kind. I poured out my confidences with a fervour and an eloquence that surprised myself, and she

listened, as only a woman, conscious that her magic touch has wakened the marble into life, can listen.

Once, and once only, did she manifest confusion and perplex me, and that was as we were slowly jogging home late in the afternoon. Half the field had fallen away, and as Jocelyn Place lay between us and Weymouth, my uncle had asked Sir Harry to stop for a glass of sherry and bitters on his way home. The two ladies refused to dismount, and as my uncle and Sir Harry went into the house, I took the opportunity of standing close to her to say:

"You lost a glove the day I saw you first—I have it now, Alice."

In a moment the sensitive face that was so sensuous, so brilliant, so maddening altogether in its ever-varying beauty, went crimson.

"Give it to me!" she said, rapidly; "it's a peculiar make; Sir Harry always gives me my gloves; you must not keep it; give it to me."

"When I do myself the honour of calling on you—on Lady Lakers," I corrected myself, as a timely remembrance of the young brunette wife flashed across me, "I will bring it back, if I must."

She gave my hand a smart tap with her whip as it rested on her pommel.

"Hands off, and no blundering, please, Mr. Jocelyn," she said, lightly, "and don't call me 'Alice' any more—before other people," she added in a whisper.

I was chilled, frightened, bewildered as she spoke. Half a dozen times, at least, that day she had let me mutter her Christian name unrebuked. She had suffered my hand to touch hers. My blood boiled now at the idea that I had given my gold for dross, and that I had been the plaything for a few hours of a coquette. In my heat I spoke, and spoke foolishly.

"If I am never to call you 'Alice' again, you had better not ask me, you had better not permit me, to call on you, Miss Lakers."

"I said 'not before other people'" she whispered,

with a flush, as Sir Harry came out and passed close to us.

"Come along, my dear," the bluff old sailor shouted out, as soon as he felt himself fairly in the saddle. "Good-bye, Jocelyn. I shall always be glad to see you, for your uncle's sake, and for your own, too, for that matter; I hope my wife has thanked you properly for looking after her to-day. Good-bye."

They all then rode off as he finished speaking, and I was left, hat in hand, feeling a considerable amount of awkwardness at having been chaffed in such a way for my marked inattention to the 'married woman,' the handsome brunette. "Anyway his parental pride ought to teach him to forgive me," I told myself as I made my way immediately to my own room, in order to avoid, until the dinner-hour, at least, the rather strong stream of badinage which would probably be made to flow in my direction on account of my unprecedented conduct to my uncle and his friends.

Piqued as I was, uncertain of her real meaning, and distrustful of myself, as I had every reason to be, I could not after a couple of days restrain the ardent desire I had to go and see more of Alice Lakers. The same impulse which urged the Laird of Cockpen to put on his "best sword and cocked hat" when he went wooing, urged me to ride my finest horse, and whistle up three or four of my best bred grayhounds and retrievers on the occasion. I pictured her coming out into the garden of Government House, patting my horse and caressing my hounds, and letting me see the whole time that she was doing these things for my sake.

Even the servant who admitted me must have seen the cloud of disappointment which lowered over me when, in answer to my inquiry for the ladies, he told me that "my lady was at home, but Miss Lakers was out riding." Why had fate not permitted me to meet her? Why did etiquette compel me to go in and pass a desolate, *distrait* quarter of an hour in the society of

the young wife of an old man, when it was that old man's daughter I was pining to see?

I conceived a decided aversion to handsome vivacious, uninteresting Lady Lakers as I followed the footman up-stairs, and told myself emphatically that she must be wanting in soul, sentiment, and all the softer and more winning feminine qualities, as she had sold her youth and good looks to age for wealth and position.

The revulsion of feeling was almost overpowering, and I have no doubt but that I looked a most abject fool when, on my name being announced, the lady seated at the end of the long room rose and came forward to meet me warmly. Fate had not been malevolent! Fortune in her kindness had not dealt cruelly with me. I forgave May for a mercenary marriage with December, for it was Alice Lakers herself who welcomed me, and not her dashing young stepmother.

"They told me you were out riding," I began, in a voice that I could hear trembled with eagerness, with joy, with hope, with fear.

"No; I thought you might call this morning, and so I resisted all entreaties, all warnings as to my little chestnut becoming unmanageable from a day's want of exercise, and remained at home to see you."

She sank her voice as she spoke the last three words, and I, after muttering something unintelligible by way of reply, found myself following her into the well-filled conservatory, where we loitered about among the flowers and ferns for an hour, during which hour I fondly and misguidedly trusted that we were learning to know each other better and love each other more.

She held my heart in the hollow of her hand long before that interview ended, and without my having expressed it in so many words, she knew to a nicety the depth and force of the passion that permeated my being. In a hundred delicate, subtle ways that were

new to my untutored senses, she made manifest that she understood and accepted my devotion and

> "Love took up the harp of life
> And smote on all its chords with might,"

producing such a melody of passionate bliss as I had never imagined in my wildest dreams.

"May I write to you?" I asked, as I was leaving, and a look of alarm dimmed the radiant fairness of her face for an instant as she answered:

"No—no, you must not think of doing so; the letter might fall—who can tell into whose hands an indiscreet letter might fall? Be good and patient, and we shall see a great deal of one another, Mr. Jocelyn, but be unguarded for one moment, and our intercourse, our *friendship*, will come to an untimely end!"

It was in vain I pleaded desperately, she was very firm, and I was obliged to submit to her decision, though I thought her over-cautious for coming to it. But any compromise was better than the dire alternative with which she threatened me—the probability, namely, of our friendship coming to an end. So I did myself the wrong of entreating her to let me carry on the siege I was raising so loyally against her heart in an underhand, roundabout, sneaking manner that was altogether foreign to my nature.

She led me on to make the plea, and then she surrendered with such apparent unwillingness to it, that I almost believed, before I left her, that I had been the one to wish and scheme that we might meet in secret and alone.

But when I got clear away from her dazzling atmosphere, I *knew* that my darling had given me my first lesson in deceiving both myself and others.

How many times during the bewildering week that followed was I perplexed and pained, mystified and maddened, by this woman and her wiles! A dozen times a day I must have been on the brink of finding her out, for I must do her the justice to say that her

efforts to avoid discovery were slight and careless enough.

Then the light dawned upon me—in fact, it was her own hands that drew aside the curtain which had veiled the truth from me.

The hounds met about two miles from Jocelyn Court on this day that sealed my fate as far as Alice Lakers was concerned, and she kept her promise of being early in the field. She had on the previous day, in the course of our stolen ride, given me the assurance that she would very shortly "put an end to my anxiety, and be as definite as I was always imploring her to be," and on this never-to-be-forgotten occasion she kept her vow with a vengeance.

I caught sight of her lissom form on the bounding chestnut the instant she entered the field with Sir Harry, and disregarding the half-contemptuous, half-amused smiles which immediately beamed upon every friendly face near me, I rode at once to her side. As I came up—she chose her moment well, it must be admitted—she rang out in the clear, sweet tones that had caressed my foolish ears so constantly during the last few days:

"Mr. Jocelyn, I have just been telling my husband that I shall ask you for a lead again to-day; my chestnut will follow your horse anywhere, and I——"

What more she would have said I know not, for her flow of eloquence was arrested by an exclamation from Sir Harry.

"Good heavens! Jocelyn, what's the matter with you? here, Mark, the boy is fainting!" and so I was, for the first and only time in my life.

I recovered quickly, and rode like the devil that day—rode in such a way that even daring Lady Lakers did not care to follow me. Only once did the exigencies of the chase bring us near enough together for the interchange of a few words. Then she turned a piteous little face toward me and said:

"Oh! I have played with fire, and I am burnt my-

self. I began in fun, and it has grown to be the one *real* feeling of my false life; say something to me, for mercy's sake."

By way of reply—I was bitterly hurt, be it remembered—I merely hummed the words of an old song:

> "I came here misled by a false woman's vow,
> I'll stay and drink health to the Baroness now,
> And oh! it will be *quite as pleasant to me*
> Since Lilla, Lilla, Lilla's a lady."

"You're only a man—you don't understand the temptation," she said, softly. Then she rode after her husband, and shortly after the husband and wife left the hunt, and for twelve years there was silence between Lady Lakers and me.

I buried my love in that silence, and no one dared to attempt to disinter it. The Lakers left Weymouth very soon after that day of my discomfiture. Rumour had it that the relations between the old husband and the young wife were not so agreeable as they had been before she had indulged in that 'fytte' of gay fooling with me. At any rate they left, and gradually the remembrance of the way the married woman "had sold young Jocelyn" faded from every mind but my own. Thus my first love died by violence, and was buried.

Just a fortnight ago the manager of the Weymouth Theatre called on me at Jocelyn Court—of which I am the master now—to ask for my patronage for the forthcoming benefit of a *debutante*, who was to make her first appearance "upon any boards" at the Weymouth Theatre as a dramatic reader.

"I can't tell what sort of stuff she is made of yet," the manager said; "but she is a beautiful woman, and a lady, and if she has anything of a voice, she ought to be a good draw. She is as candid as the day, too," he went on, "for she tells me she has only taken to this as a forlorn hope; she has tried teaching, writing, music—everything that a woman can try that's honest, in fact, and she has failed. Her family have cut her altogether."

"Why?" I asked, with languid interest.

"Because she stood by her stepmother when there was a division in the camp, and now that lady's resources having failed her, this poor young woman is sadly put to it to keep the wolf from the door. Do the best you can for her, Mr. Jocelyn."

"I will," I promised, absently, as my memory retraversed some paths I had trodden in company with the stepmother of another beautiful, well-born woman.

I had a premonition that something would occur which would interest me deeply, either for pleasure or for pain, when I entered the theatre on the night of "Miss Elliot's benefit," and it happened soon enough to satisfy the most impatient nature.

The moment this new dramatic reader made her appearance on the boards, I recognised in her the handsome brunette daughter of Sir Harry Lakers, and I seemed to understand and grasp the situation at once. It was for Alice, for my fatally fair and false first love, that this noble-hearted woman was working.

My tale is soon told now. I saw Miss Lakers that night, and heard from her that Sir Harry had never forgiven nor forgotten the deception his lovely young wife had practised on me.

"Papa was cruel to her from that hour," the girl said, hotly. "Yes, Mr. Jocelyn, *cruel*, though he never beat her nor neglected her, nor anything of that kind; he was cruel in a way that only a woman can discern, and I did discern and resent it. He nearly crushed the life out of her by his unspoken suspicions and unworded reproaches; and because I would not let papa think that I thought him right and her wrong, he punished us both to the best of his ability, by leaving me penniless and depriving her of everything but the pension, which he could not cut off."

"So your father is dead?" I asked, with a beating heart.

"Yes; didn't you know it? How odd!"

I shook my head. I could not tell her that no one

had ever dared to mention the name of Lakers to me, and that whenever I had seen it in the columns of the naval intelligence, I had hastily skipped it.

"Would you like to see Alice again?" Miss Lakers went on, bluntly. "Speak out honestly, as human being to human being; would you like to see Alice again?"

"Is she Alice Lakers still?" I asked, hesitatingly. "Of course she is not, though. How should it be that such a lovely woman should remain unmarried!"

"She is Alice Lakers still, and she isn't so wonderfully lovely now," Miss Lakers laughed. "Just consider, Mr. Jocelyn, it's twelve years since she took you by storm as a sylph. She is a substantial, sensible woman now, so probably you will not like her half as well as you did of old."

Quietly, as Miss Lakers spoke, there came into the room a woman whom my heart recognised, though my eyes might have failed to do so, and quietly during the next hour she talked to me, and established her empire over my soul. Yes, my second love, the one that will last to the end of my life, is my first restored to me, purified by the pain the *reality* of my love had cost her through twelve long years.

LASSIE.

THE scene was a sunny one, but the hearts and faces of the actors in it were sadly clouded.

Broad sunbeams fell upon the clean-looking white stone walls of the large square house that was a well-known landmark in that county side. The windows almost winked with brightness. The lawn was as smooth as a billiard-table. The flowers were all cultivated and tied up carefully. The shrubs all neatly trimmed and cut within proper bounds. The entrance gates were well hung. The approach was well kept. A fat pony stood in a neatly appointed chaise at the door. Sportive dogs—grayhounds and setters—rolled on the grass in vain pursuit of shadows and their own tails. All looked prosperous and peaceful. No stranger passing by could have supposed that the head of the house at this moment was—Ruin!

For, only the other day, the head of the house had been a household word in that locality for kindly deeds and hearty hospitality. Only the other day this well-ordered home had been one of the happiest in Norfolk. Only the other day Captain Miller and his wife could look at each other with hopeful, happy eyes, as they spoke of the future of their children, and were justified in finding it fair.

And now the change had come.

It had come with appalling abruptness. The shadow of it fell one day when the postboy brought an ominous-looking official letter, which conveyed the information to the good, proud, honourable old naval officer that his son—the boy of boys, the flower of the flock—was "dismissed the service for debt and drunkenness."

It was the worst wound the gallant old sailor had ever received during the whole of his career. But he struggled against it. He paid the debts, and prayed for the cure of the other evil, and showed a brave front to the sorrowing wife and unconscious daughter.

But before the anguish of that wound was over, another and incurable one was dealt to him. The son, who had been his greatest glory and his greatest grief, was drowned!

His daughter Florence, or "Lassie," as she was always called, took her first lesson in the sorrow in which there is no joy that day, as she saw the old man break down under the blow. He died of it in a few weeks, and his death left his wife and daughter Florence dependent on the pension of fifty pounds a year which Mrs. Miller received as the widow of a lieutenant in the navy.

The house they lived in—the house in which Lassie had been born, and in which she had seen all she knew of life—was not their own. Mr. Miller had occupied it during his term of employment as officer in charge of the Coastguard Station here; and now another officer would take his place, and their old home would soon know them no more.

It was a dear old home, and Florence loved it for more reasons than one. In it she had passed a supremely happy and unfettered childhood. In it she had seen the birth of her first romance, and as that romance still flourished, what wonder that she found the birthplace of it passing fair!

The darkest days of that sad death were over for

the girl. She had mourned her father bitterly, with all the force and passion of a forcible and passionate nature. But she had mourned him so for a month, and a month is a long period of time at twenty. The head and heart had both been bowed by the stormiest, most genuine grief. But both are elastic at twenty, and so they were raising themselves up again on this day when she is first introduced to the reader.

Though Mrs. Miller knew that it was needful she should soon go, she had not begun to dismantle the house yet, and now on this fair April day, as they sat in the drawing-room, everything looked so precisely as it had looked on previous fair April days, that Florence found it almost impossible to believe they were going away.

"Why should we go, mother?" she burst out, impetuously, following out her own thoughts. "This isn't a Government house; *why* shouldn't we keep it on?"

The mother who was addressed found it very hard to dash the bright speaker's belief in the maternal ability to do anything that was pleasant to that well-loved child. But, sooner or later, Florry must be made to understand the full force of the change that had befallen them.

"I couldn't pay for it, dear, if I did keep it on," she said, unfalteringly; "besides, we must go some place where I can do something."

"Do something?"

Florry's hazel eyes expressed boundless surprise—worlds of inquiry.

"We are quite poor people now, Lassie." She tried to speak cheerfully, and Lassie did so honour the effort her mother made. "Quite poor people, you know; and we have only God and ourselves to rely upon. It will be a hard change for you, my daughter."

Florence was dumb with pity for her mother. She had no thought of herself yet. Twenty is rarely selfish theory.

"But you will bear it bravely, won't you?" Mrs. Miller continued; and then Florence remembered that her mother had lost more than she (Florence) had done, and she strove to give the required promise, and to think coherently of all it referred to.

A few words as to the *personnel* of my heroine here. She was not one of those whom women hate, and men desperately adore. These were very much alive to her influence—that sympathetic influence of hers, which soothed and incited, satisfied and caused the one on whom it was brought to bear to wish to know more of her, all at the same moment. In these early days of hers, it must have been a hard, cold nature, indeed, that did not incline favourably to Florence Miller.

And this not because of any extraordinary beauty. She was a pretty girl. She had the admirable points of blood and breeding, in the shape of a small head, and well-shaped, small hands and feet. But she was not a beauty. She was only intensely interesting, and perfectly graceful and refined. Refined, and, at the same time, fraught with a full bounding vitality, that was a sight to make old men young again—an infectious, spirit-stirring vitality, that made the far-sighted see some sorrow for her in the future.

"With that eager, bounding, restless way, what feminine pursuits could she ever expect to follow with satisfaction?" women would ask of one another.

But men were more apt to feel that she would put plenty of warmth and colour into the life of the fellow who was lucky enough to get her eventually.

Without being absolutely beautiful, there was much that was charming in the delicate-featured face and the lissom form. There were very tender depths in her dark hazel eyes. There were rich ruddy reflections in the silky brown hair. There was a most seductive suppleness about the lines of her waist and shoulders when she was well outlined on her handsome pony, Don Juan.

Altogether "Lassie," as her father had always called her, had won a fair share of admiration by the time she was twenty, and an even fairer share of love.

As has been already stated, Lassie had begun her romance before she came into these pages. Therefore, though her father's death was a bitter grief to her, the world was not all dark in consequence of it. There was a broad gleam of sunshine in her heart whenever she thought of one who was away now, but who would surely come to her one day and claim the heart he had already fully gained.

Two years ago this light began shining upon her. The squire's only son, Leonard Raymont, home on leave for a few weeks before his regiment sailed for India, had seen Lassie, and succumbed to her with flattering speed.

The gay, handsome young soldier had flung himself into the affair with all the ardour of his nature, and Lassie had responded with all the glowing vitality—all the generous, honest imprudence of hers.

Only his parents and himself knew how very near he had been proposing, then, to Lassie. Only Lassie knew how bitter the disappointment was to her when he went away without doing so.

But he was the squire's only son, the heir to a property, and, "at any rate, *test* your own heart by absence from her, Leo, dear; for sweet girl as she is, you ought to marry differently," his mother pleaded. And so he, being a loving son, consented to compromise matters with them in this way:

"If I come back at the end of three years, loving Lassie as I do now, will you and my father receive her as your daughter? If you promise to do so, I'll go away now without speaking; but if you won't, why, I shall gain nothing by waiting."

Mrs. Raymont hesitated for a moment. But she was a sagacious woman, and at the end of that moment she gave the promise he required. She had great faith in chance. In the course of the next three

years, something would surely happen. Leonard would forget her, or Lassie would forget him. At any rate, it would be deferring the evil day to give the promise.

So the mother gave it, and Leonard Raymont went away, full of faith in himself and Lassie.

It had been very hard for him to keep his part of the agreement when he went to say good-bye to her. They had been so much together during the bright summer month that was just past, and she liked him so well, and showed her liking so openly.

Poor Lassie! the love-light in her eyes nearly melted his resolution. But, unluckily for them both, he kept it, and Lassie did not know the reason why.

But though he would not ask her to be his wife until those three years of trial were over, he did show his love for her plain enough. They spent the time of his parting visit under the green trees on the lawn, and as he took a rose from her hand, he pressed a tiny ring on to her finger, and whispered, "Would she wear it for his sake?" And Lassie, who would have adventured upon the thinnest ice for his sake, said, "Yes," and wondered whether she was engaged or not.

"Shall I tell mamma of this?" she asked, presently, and the lover felt terribly lowered in his own eyes, as his bond with *his* mother compelled him to answer:

"No, darling; not till I give you leave. You can trust me, Lassie?"

Trust him! Ay, through good or evil, she felt as if her trust in him could never be shaken, poor, short-sighted, loving little mortal. So, then he had kissed her, and left her—for three years.

She was as faithful to that little ring as a wife could have been to a wedding one. It never left her finger; but as she wore many rings—big ones among which this tiny one lurked unnoticed—it was never seen. And now, after two years, the giver of it was dearer to her than ever.

This was the hope that brightened the dark present to her—the hope that he would soon come back, and tell to all the world what he had already told to her. He was the head of his house now, for the old squire was dead. Many people marvelled at his mother being so little anxious for his return. They little knew that poor Lassie was the obstacle to the glad welcome she would otherwise have accorded to her boy when he should come at last to reign over his own.

"Time, time was all she wanted," Mrs. Raymont told herself. "Miss Miller will surely feel that she *ought* to marry, now that she's dependent on the mere pittance her mother has," the lady thought; and Leonard's mother determined that the neighbourhood should yield a husband to Lassie, and that soon.

The fiction of intimacy had always been kept up between the Raymonts and the Millers. Even during those love passages between Leonard and Lassie, Mrs. Raymond had always seemed to seek the girl, and make much of her. The danger being there, she felt it would be better to have it under her eye, as it were. So she had always kept up an appearance of fondness and admiration for Lassie, which the latter responded to with all her young, warm, honest heart.

Just at this juncture, Providence (she herself declared) befriended Mrs. Raymont. The Millers were very much in the thoughts of everybody by reason of Mrs. Miller having openly avowed her intention of leaving the neighbourhood soon, and this avowal brought matters to a climax. The curate of the parish, Mr. Harold Cuthbert, had idolised Lassie from the day he knew her first, took heart of grace, and threw prudence to the winds, when he heard that his idol was going. So this complication was introduced into the affair. He proposed to her. He did what a man should never do when he is not sure of his verdict—he wrote to her, instead of wooing in person. And Lassie wrote in reply a quiet, unmistakeable rejection

of his offer. When she had written this, she told her mother what he had done. And Mrs. Miller's burst of thankfulness took Lassie's breath away.

"Oh, Lassie, Lassie, there *is* a drop of sweetness left in my cup, after all! *You* will be safe and cared for," the poor anxious mother said, caressing her child, and, for the first time in her life, the child recoiled from that caress.

"Mother, dear, read my answer," she said, with a little quiver in her voice. "You see, I don't care for him—and—I'm so sorry, for he's such a nice fellow, but—I *don't* care for him."

"I won't attempt to influence you," Mrs Miller said, sobbing; "but it would have made me so happy, Lassie."

"Mother!" Lassie exclaimed, kneeling down, and half hiding her face in her mother's lap, "do you remember Leonard?"

Mrs. Miller glanced keenly at the girl.

"Is that idle flirtation to stand in the way of this honourable love? Then, indeed, I was wrong in trusting so to your sense, Lassie."

"We love each other, and he's coming back," Lassie whimpered. Then she showed the ring, and told all there was to tell.

It was very little, after all; but Mrs. Miller was a loving, sympathetic mother, and she listened to it, and hoped the girl was not deceiving herself, and wished that she could stay on in this place until the young squire came home.

"And we shall hear if he is likely to come soon, at once, my darling, for here comes Mrs. Raymont to call."

At sight of Mrs. Raymont, Lassie always brightened, and was at her best.

Leonard's mother! How could she be regarded as other than something infinitely superior to most people by the girl who adored Leonard? She had now, with a heart so full of kindness, it seemed, come to express

"regret at their going away, and to hope that the friendly intercourse of so many years would remain unbroken, wherever they went."

She rolled many such sentences out rapidly, and Lassie listened to them, and believed that they meant something so utterly different to that which they did mean.

In her gratitude, the young girl could have kissed the hem of the worldly woman's garment.

Presently, Lassie was called away, and the two elder women were left together.

"And now," Mrs. Miller thought, "I will tell her about Mr. Cuthbert in confidence. If she knows anything of her son's feelings she will surely speak."

So the mother, whose sole care was for the happiness of her daughter, spoke to the mother whose sole care was for the aggrandizment of her son. It was a woefully unequal match.

"I have to tell you something, old friend," she began, with a little tremor in her voice. "I've looked upon Lassie as a child till to-day, and to-day I learn that my child has been sought as a wife. It has agitated me greatly," she added, hastily, as a few tears welled up into her eyes.

Mrs. Raymont felt her heart stand still.

"Could Leonard have been mad, weak, rash, wicked enough to forget his promise? Surely not. Her boy was the soul of honour, and a full year of the binding time remained unexpired."

She recovered her breath, and spoke.

"Before I can congratulate you, I must hear who the happy man is," she said, with an effort.

Then Mrs. Miller shook her head, and answered: "It is Mr. Cuthbert; and he is not a happy man at all, if his happiness depends on Lassie, for she has refused him."

"Refused him!" No written words can render the mournful amazement which Mrs. Raymont contrived to infuse into those two words. "I pity you most sin-

cerely. This must be a terrible blow to you;" and then Mrs. Raymont played a strong card, by placing her hands on Mrs. Miller's trembling ones, and adding, "You must feel it. He is not a man to be played with. I am shocked and disappointed at Lassie's conduct."

"But *why?*" the perplexed mother asked. "Disappointed as I am, I should have been more shocked if she had accepted him without love."

"There it is! We *all* thought that she was really in earnest with Mr. Cuthbert. But I fear—I greatly fear—that Lassie is a flirt."

"Oh, no!" The mother's indignation was great, but she managed to subdue it. "Lassie is no flirt. Her manner to Mr. Cuthbert has been the manner of a frank child. He cannot complain of her on that score."

"I *must* say, fond as I am of Lassie, that I have been deceived by her manner," wily Mrs. Raymont went on. "It would have been so pleasant for us all to have had her settled here as Mrs. Cuthbert. Leonard will be sorry when he hears of it, for, I suppose, he will soon be settling at home now with his wife."

"His wife!" Mrs. Miller asked, and her tongue grew parched.

"He is not married yet, but very much in love with General Hamilton's daughter Rose; this is a great secret, but I tell you because I know you will sympathise with me in my joy. Her beauty is beyond description, he tells me. What a charming *coterie* we should have been if Lassie would only settle here!"

Something induced Mrs. Raymont to take her departure very soon.

Perhaps it was that she did not care to face the girl.

When Lassie came back, Mrs. Raymont was gone.

"Lassie, I told Mrs. Raymont about Mr. Cuthbert's offer," Mrs. Miller began.

"And what did she say?"

"I dare not prevaricate. The sooner she knows the truth, the better," Mrs. Miller thought. Then she said, aloud, "Mrs. Raymont regretted your rejection of Mr. Cuthbert very much. She said there would have been such a charming *coterie* here when Leonard came home with his wife."

Lassie looked up with a face as white as the face of a corpse. But she did not speak.

"He is not married yet,'" Mrs. Miller went on, nervously, in answer to that look of interrogation; "but very much in love with a Miss Rose Hamilton."

"Stop, mother," Lassie whispered, hoarsely. "I will do as you please, and marry Mr. Cuthbert. *You* will be happier, and I can't be more wretched than I am."

. . . . . .

Another year was added to Lassie's life. A year marked in its course by many changes. In the first place the Millers no longer occupied the handsome square white house wherein we first made their acquaintance. Mrs. Miller had taken a sweet little cottage on the outskirts of the village, where she carried on the war comfortably enough by means of a moderately well-off old maiden aunt who boarded with her. Mrs. Raymont was gone to spend a few months in Paris. And Lassie had been Mrs. Cuthbert for ten months.

She had gone to her husband with a heart most horribly seared, and he had dealt most gently and judiciously with her. He surrounded her with every comfort, he never sought to compel her confidence, he showed himself truly fond and proud of her. But for all that, the man knew that he had made a great mistake in marrying this girl who had no love for him.

Now that love no longer illumined her life, she felt the latter to be a stagnant pool indeed, down in this little barren eastern county village in which her lot was cast.

There were many things which she *might* have

done; but there was absolutely nothing which she *must* do. She could not hurl herself into parochial life. It meant nothing to her, and she was not essential to its well-being. The choral society, the blanket club, and soup-kitchen, all got on as well without her as they would have done under her auspices. Yet, with all that vitality, she surely needed a mission?

And she found none ready to her hand. For all her husband's great regard, she was alone in the world.

And she felt her loneliness so painfully!

Under these circumstances, it was natural that the solitude of her life should weigh upon her woefully. Her husband absorbed in his clerical duties, her household moving on like clock-work, her desperate young heart thrown back for long lonely hours every day upon itself as its own and only confidant and counsellor—what wonder that she felt very often the game was not worth the candle, and that it would have been better had she plodded on for any number of years as Lassie Miller!

That daily round of small paltry duty which it devolved upon her to do! She was not benefited by it, neither was any other person. It gave no one pleasure —herself least of all. It was all dull—dull and objectless, she felt.

"Harold got on just as well without me—his prize prayer-book class, his parish, and his choir are enough for him. He never needed *me*."

She was in this mood. She was telling herself this persistently one fair early summer day, because it struck her that it was specially hard, when all the world was preening itself in glad expectation, as it were, that she should be so sad and objectless. The dread of loneliness was the worst dread she had upon her in the morning. Poor thing! she had another and more tangible one before night.

The country parson's wife was a very child in her eager desire to "get over the time" that had no legitimate claim upon her.

"Even mamma gets on just as well without me. Aunt Hester satisfies her cravings for companionship quite as well as I did. And Mr. Cuthbert never even thinks that I am dull."

There was a passionate outcry in her heart against the injustice of it all, as she thought this. At twenty-one, for a pretty and clever woman to feel herself of no account whatever in the world—to suspect that no one heeds her—is to be in a position of the greatest difficulty and danger. Poor Lassie! she was in this position now. Her husband was intent on his duty, and never gave a thought to that heart-weariness of hers which not all the comforts he surrounded her with could assuage.

She drifted out, after her early luncheon (which she had eaten alone in dulness), through the village street —away out into the meadow lands beyond. The meadows were full of brilliant water-side flowers—of king-cups and meadow-sweet, and the big bright blue brook-lime.

"How can they go on being so beautiful, year after year, all for nothing!" she thought, wearily; and then she gathered a handful of them, knowing all the while that she would hardly have the heart to carry them home, and arrange them, for the arrangement would bring no pleasure to any eye save her own, and it is hard to feel isolated even in taste.

She was a long distance from the village when she began to think about going home. There was no urgent need for her to get back, truly. Nobody wanted her, nobody would miss her. If she were ready to sit down to the six o'clock dinner, Mr. Cuthbert would feel satisfied. He demanded such a little due, what wonder that she was beginning to revolt against any at all?

Her hands were full of the flowers. Little wet, muddy hands they were, for she had dabbled in the water freely in pursuit of these graceful beauties. Her hat was drooping on one side, too, and her dress was

drabbled. Altogether, she was looking very untidy, and very lovely, as Leonard Raymont came over a stile right into her path.

She dropped the flowers in her paralysis of woe and pained surprise. And he came up so gladly and unconsciously to greet her!

"Lassie—my Lassie!" His arms were round her swaying form, his kisses were on her face, his passionately loving eyes were looking into her bewildered ones.

"I've only been home an hour, my darling, sweetest. I missed my mother in Paris, and came straight on to the sunbeam of my life. *Mine* now, Lassie, before all the world—my love that I've waited for, and who has waited from me these long years. They're *over*, Lassie. I *know* you love me, but tell me so."

All this time he had been showering kisses upon her. All this time she had been praying to "die then! —then!"

Her sense of self-respect, her reason, her strength, all came back together. She wrung herself out of his embrace. She stood, panting and free, aloof from him.

"I don't know what to say to you," she began, with a sort of cry. "Where is your wife, that you can do this——"

He stopped her, and gathered up her hands, and held them tightly, while he forced her to explain herself.

"His wife!" *She* was the only wife he would ever seek—ever desire to win. Rose Hamilton—dear little woman—was married to the best friend he had in the world. Lassie would be so fond of her!

She almost knelt before him as she took her hands from his grasp, and he stood back a step from her.

"Is it possible that you doubt me at all, Lassie?"

She shook her head in dumb anguish. Then, imploringly, she lifted her sorrow-stricken face toward him, pleading mutely for a merciful judgment as she pointed to her wedding-ring.

"Married! good heavens, no! Lassie, *say* it's a joke!"

"It's true—true—true!" she gurgled out between the sobs that came fast and pantingly now.

He steadied himself against the trunk of a tree, and for several seconds there was no sound heard save the ripple of the stream that flowed through the meadow.

At last, clasping his arms over his chest, he lifted his face, and looked at her.

"You should have told me this before, Lassie. You shouldn't have let me come and get my blow here, and—and take another man's wife in my arms, believing that she was going to be mine."

"I will tell you why——"

"Perhaps you had better not," he interrupted, hastily. "It's hard enough to know you've gone from me, but to hear all the reasons that made you go might be harder still—the tale of the growth of your love for another man, all the while I was loving and believing in you so."

"You won't have to hear that, Leonard." She called him by his name again with the old well-loved, well-remembered, subtle inflection in her tone that he had so longed to hear once more during all those three weary years.

"Tell me—tell me anything. Only to hear you speak now is something."

Then she told him of his mother's thoughtful kindness and courteous regrets, and they understood fully, now that it was too late, how they had been duped.

After his first burst of angry emotion, when she had finished her recital, there fell another silence upon them—a silence that was sadder than the first, in that now they knew all was said which might be said between them, and that there was nothing more to do but part.

He hated himself for it, but he could not refrain from the utterance of one speech:

"Are you happy?"

"My husband is very good to me," she answered, promptly; and bitter as his sorrow was for that blighted life of hers, he could not help feeling glad that he had no successor in her heart.

"And you? Shall you marry?" she asked, falteringly.

She knew that if he did, all the light left in her life would go out of it for her.

"Marry! No; that sort of thing is over for me. You know that."

"Shall you live there?" she asked, indicating the hall by a nod of her head.

"No. I couldn't live near you, Lassie," he said, with such a ring of pain in his voice, that involuntarily she held out her hand to him.

"Leonard, do you mean that you'll go away, and never let me see you again?" she cried out. "Can't we be friends?"

He shook his head and laughed sadly.

"My poor Lassie, how little you know of the world, and of men, yet! We must take leave of each other now, Lassie, if we don't want to be more wretched than we are already. I shall leave the home I meant to be so happy in with you, for ever, probably, to-morrow."

So he really intended doing; but Lassie was a thorough woman. She could not bear that this brief glimpse of him should be the last she should see of the man she loved so well. She thought no harm; she feared no false judgment; she only wanted to see him sometimes.

So she pleaded that he should not go yet, but stay and be friends with her husband and herself. And he promised that he would come at least once before he left. And then she went home.

How should she tell Harold of this meeting? for, tell him she determined she would, at once. She practised several speeches as she dressed for dinner; but when she went down and he met her with a frank,

kind—"You're late for dinner, Lassie dear; have you had a pleasant walk?"—all the speeches went out of her head, and she could only stammer out:

"Yes—no—that is, Leonard Raymont is back."

"Well."

Mr. Cuthbert considerately kept his eyes fixed on the table-cloth as he said this. He had heard a rumour of what people called "the flirtation," between the squire's son and Lassie at the time. But he was philosophically indifferent to it in all sincerity.

He held that she must have got over it, or she wouldn't have married him. Still, he could understand her having a slight feeling about it, now that Raymont had returned so unexpectedly.

"Well!" she repeated; "and I saw him, that is all."

"How does he look?" Mr. Cuthbert asked coolly.

Her husband's composure steadied her nerves wonderfully.

"He looks as he always did."

There was the tiniest falter in her tone as she said this.

"I'll call on him to-morrow," Mr. Cuthbert said, brightly.

Then he spoke of a difficulty he was in with a churchwarden, and a Government grant that he hoped to get for the school, until Lassie was perfectly mistress of herself again.

Mr. Cuthbert called on the new squire the next day, and cheerfully combated that gentleman's avowed intention of going away.

"It will do the parish an infinity of good if you stay here. A man of your mark in the neighbourhood ought to reside on his own land, among his own people," he urged.

But Mr. Raymont took a moody view of the case, and said that he "was not likely to lead them a very good example."

However, business chained him there for a week or two, and at the expiration of that time he had got in-

to the habit of seeing Lassie, and of hearing of her as "Mrs. Cuthbert," and of thinkiug of her as another man's wife; and so he stayed on at the hall.

Poor Lassie had meant so innocently well when she first made her appeal to him "to stay and be friends with her!" But when he had been home a few weeks, the full force of her folly came home to her. There could be no calm friendship between those two.

It was a small place, and the society was limited and dull. What wonder that the two who were most congenial to each other in it should insensibly drift together! He never forgot the respect due to the wife of his friend. He never called her anything but Mrs. Cuthbert. He never, by word or look, referred to the past. But, for all that, Lassie felt herself to be horribly guilty when she found herself thinking of his coming, or grieving at his going.

The sight of her was still pleasanter, sweeter to him than the sight of any other woman in the world, and so he gratified himself with it freely. On some pretext or other, he was perpetually finding his way to the Parsonage. One day he would bring her a book, another day a plant, another, a newspaper and a bouquet of flowers. It was altogether wrong, she knew; but, oh, how delicious it was to be the recipient of these attentions from him still!

He was doing no harm, he thought. Poor fellow! She was so patiently, sweetly self-possessed toward him, that he did not even guess what a storm was raging in her heart. To see her often, to hear her voice and watch her, and love her with a love that he would never speak of again—this was enough for him, he told himself. But Lassie, who was learning "what men are" through much tribulation—poor Lassie knew better.

When it dawned upon her, as it did, startlingly, one day, that the joy she felt in the sight of him was only a shade less than a sin, she reproached herself bitterly, for his sake, as well as her own, that she had ever

raised her voice in pleading for him to stay and renew old associations under the specious name of friendship. But, as she had wrought it, so it behoved her to remedy the wrong.

It would never do now to ask him to go, or to beg him to cease visiting her. That would be such a confession of weakness. In such agony of mind as she had never experienced before, she realized at last that there was but one other path for her to take. She must tell her husband—tell him of all her love and weariness and weakness, and then beg him to have pity on her, and to take her away.

It was a desperate step for a wife to take. It was a dreadful story for a husband to have to listen to. But Mr. Cuthbert was a remarkably just and conscientious man, therefore he thoroughly appreciated that sense of justice and that exquisite conscientiousness which induced his wife to make him her confidant in this her supreme hour of peril. He was touched, too, by the childlike way in which she wound up her appeal.

"You see, Harold, I wouldn't let him know any of this for the world, so I can't ask him to go."

"No guilty woman could have said that," Harold Cuthbert felt.

Accordingly he responded as she, knowing the generous nature of the man, felt sure he would respond.

And soon she was safe, but so miserable; for the heart that had been distended by love such as she had known, could never be filled to satisfaction with mere duty.

They made their move soberly and discreetly. Perhaps only one person in the parish guessed why Mr. Cuthbert so abruptly removed from a congenial sphere of duty, and that person never worded his suspicion to any human being. But he gathered a great deal more than poor Lassie meant him to gather from her going off without beat of drum.

Three years after, she was a widow—a widow who mourned the loss of her husband, as a friend, heartily

and honestly, but who never feigned to think of him as a "nearer and dearer one yet than all others." In fact, poor grateful Lassie lamented him, but she remembered that Leonard Raymont still lived.

That he still lived and still loved her, he proved by-and-by; and when they had been married some time, she asked:

"But how could you have been so sure that I loved you still, Leo? I'm sure I never even 'looked.'"

"No; but you ran away. You were such a good girl, that I was 'sure,' then."

"Oh, 'sure,' when I meant that to be the end of it all!"

"'You should have told me that before, Lassie,'" he laughed and quoted; and Lassie bowed her bright head in grateful acknowledgment of the blessing it was to her that "her meaning" had been so completely misunderstood.

GEORGIE SINGLETON.

"THANK heaven for having got away without greater let and hindrance than has fallen to my portion," a lady muttered to herself, sitting herself in a comfortably-cushioned corner of a first-class carriage, as the train dragged itself slowly away from a London Terminus. A young man rushed along the platform at the heels of a lunatic guard, who threw open the door of the very carriage in which Miss Singleton was uttering her expressions of gratitude.

He was a young, well-favoured gentleman, who thus, at the last moment, invaded the lady's solitude: but his advent was ill-timed. Miss Singleton had hoped that, at least, she might have herself to herself on her way down to the distant county in which she had determined to pitch her tent for a year or two. Had the intruder been halt and blind, he would have received just as warm a look of welcome from the pretty young lady in the corner, as did this light-of-foot, blonde-haired, blue-eyed young gentleman.

The young lady in the corner was very pretty, grim nd repulsive as she was endeavouring to make herself

look. Though she was travelling alone, it was evident, at a glance, that she did not belong to the compulsorily unprotected class. There was a sumptuousness about her, and about her attire and belongings that forbade any such supposition. I have used the word "sumptuousness" advisedly. It expressed precisely those personal attributes of hers which were not expressed by the words "pretty," "beautiful," "lovely," "graceful," or the like. She was pretty—beautiful, even—and she was remarkably graceful: but she was more than these things. There was a richness about her physique, about her voice, and manner, and dress, which was sumptuous.

The first thing the unwanted stranger saw, as he stumbled into the carriage, was a billowing mass of rich violet-sheeny drapery. Then he looked up, and saw graceful shoulders striving to get more into the corner, and long blue eyes, looking vexedly at him, from under a heavy fringe of black lashes, and a knitted brow, and a frowning mouth. By-and-by he saw that those graceful shoulders were draped in velvet of the same colour as her sheeny silken dress: that there was rich, soft lace about her white, full throat and slender wrists; that her hands were exquisitely shaped and exquisitely gloved; that the sailor-shaped velvet hat surmounted an egg-shaped face, whose pure, warm fairness, was lighted up by those long blue eyes before noticed; and that what could be seen of her hair showed it to be of that golden chestnut which is commonly called auburn. He could not help wondering who she was. So young still, apparently, and unmarried (she had taken off her left-hand glove before he came to this conclusion, on the evidence of her unadorned wedding finger), and so well off—to judge from her appearance—and alone!

He would have wondered still more, had he known the real facts of that lady's case. The beauty about whom all was so very sumptuous, was feeling life to be a very barren waste, as she journeyed through

the fairest parts of England on that bright February morning. Yet from the point of view which all the world, that knew of her existence, took of her, hers was a very enviable lot. Her uncle, old Mr. Singleton, a wealthy old bachelor, had adopted Georgina Singleton, when she was seven, and had died when she was six-and-twenty, leaving her with four hundred a year absolutely at her own disposal.

This had happened a year ago, and during this year Georgie had stayed on in the comfortable old house, out near Kensington Gardens—stayed on, to the scandal of all the mothers with portionless, but otherwise marriageable, daughters—without a chaperon. Stayed on, and, after a time, "they knew, actually received people," and "visited," "before the crape for her benefactor was rusty." Stayed on (which they did not know) on a forlorn hope, poor thing!—a hope that had begun to bloom ten years before my story opens. A hope—such is woman's strange tenacity about such things—that was only withering (not withered) now.

In his way, old Ralph Singleton was a *savan*. He had never sought "popularity or notoriety," he was wont to assert, and, therefore, it may be supposed to have been gratifying to him that he had never gained those snares. His name never came very prominently before the world, still it was known in certain scientific circles. At any rate, his scientific reputation was the remote cause of my writing this story, or, rather, of the bricks-and-mortar wherewith this story is built, being formed. His reputation as a *savan* made it a less incongruous thing than it would otherwise have been, that men who were *savans*, and scientific in something else besides reputation, should assemble at his house occasionally.

When Georgie was about eighteen, she made one of a small evening party, at the house of some people with whom she was but slightly acquainted. Her host and hostess, and their three daughters, were people

who hung on to the hem of the garments of literature, as Mr. Singleton did to those of science. They had a cousin, who was a first-rate press-man, a man of real power and ability, of whom a party paper was only too glad to get hold. This man, on the night of Georgie Singleton's introduction to the Garstins' house, brought with him a young man, who, young man as he was, had done more that year in the way of antiquarian research, than any one of his contemporaries. He had made his name, and become distinguished (a good old English name too—St. Aubyn), and the Garstins openly avowed that they worshipped talent; but, above all, when it was combined with youth, good looks, and good birth. Altogether, Miss Singleton was only true to her sex, in being carried by his attentions, when he bestowed them upon her, and this she was the more readily, perhaps, from the lively remembrance she had of the remarks with which the Garstins had prefaced his introduction to her. "Mr. St. Aubyn stands alone already. Bernard says" (one of the daughters asserted Bernard was their cousin), "Walter St. Aubyn will make an epoch in literature; but I don't suppose you'll like him, Georgie."

However, in direct opposition to their prophetic judgment, Georgie did like him very much—almost as soon as he tried to make her do so. The man who was brought down as a "lion," turned from his own brethren to this young girl, who knew not even the names, much less the nature, of the subjects that chiefly engrossed him in life. And he was charmed with the freshness and vitality of that sumptuous physique, and had no contempt for the ignorance that she openly exhibited, without a touch of the shame that a falser nature might have felt.

They met again, and again, and the liking between them grew unequally. It had not been his fate to see much of women, or rather to have been thrown into intimate communion with women, before this. He

had heard flattering truths from the lips of stern old scholars, whose grandson he might have been. But no young and pretty woman had ever panted out incoherent admiration for his mystical (to her) greatness before. And he was a man, in whose veins the blood was still warm with youth and passion. While, as for her, vanity worked in her, and softened her heart, and made it pervious to the most subtly insidious attacks that the cleverness of man could devise. He had won her before he wooed her. So, when he did begin to woo, in guarded phraseology (for the brilliant young *savan* was poor, and had a keen eye to the practical in life), she surrendered herself, her heart, her soul, her mind —to him, without discretion.

He loved her, told her so in desperate words. He was ready to accord her a chivalrous devotion, that would have carried the senses of the sanest woman. He absorbed her; he dazzled her; he monopolised, commanded, worshipped her. In a few words—he turned her head. But he could not marry her until the arrival of some golden future, which he did not particularly define.

There was no engagement between these young people. There was no avowed bond between them. It would be idle to portray each incident, in each year, that rolled over, and left the hope with which she had faced the world, at eighteen, a trifle less bright than it was the year before. The years were many. The lavish beauty of the girl had ripened into the gorgeous beauty of the woman. She began to get a little tired of the bondage that was unshared by the one who laid it on her. The hope began to die out, and with it the love that had kept that hope alive. So the hope lessened, and the love lessened; and, beginning by distrusting his sincerity and integrity a little, she went on to distrust him too much. The fairer his words were, the falser they sounded in her ears.

Then came her uncle's death and increased prosperity; and she half scorned her lover as she

thought, "Now he will want to make me and what I have his own." But she was mistaken in thus judging him. He was too well satisfied with standing arrangements—too well pleased with the way the world was going with him, under existing circumstances. It was still not "in the order of things" that he should alter his course of life. A wife and domestic cares would interfere with the transcendental character of the career which he had chalked out for himself.

But the woman to whom he half said, half hinted, these ideas, was not the same one who had, for a few years, been blinded by his transcendental talk. But old habits are hard to break through. It was easy enough to make up her mind to have done with it. It was far more difficult to decide how it must be done.

At last [illegible] came to her from the wayside, as it were. [illegible] some chance acquaintance—some lady, [illegible], and happy, in some love of her own, [illegible] Mr. St. Aubyn, and who thought him "[illegible]."

"What is it about him?" she asked, innocently. "Does he distrust his power of pleasing, that he strives so hard to make women love him? His personal appearance would be against some men, perhaps; but then he has a fascination that would be fearful, if his physique matched it."

"Yes, he has a great fascination," Georgie constrained herself to say. "He has exerted it on you, I find?"

"Well, no," she said, with a laugh; "I see what he might be, but he is not it, to me. I wear proof armour, you know," she continued, blushing; "his manner to me, and to all other women of a certain calibre, is that of a man who would make them love him—not of one who is ready to love them: that mistake saves him from being dangerous—I told him so."

"You told him so?" Georgie questioned.

"Yes," the other replied, carelessly, "and I cut his vanity, I could see; but it would be unfair if one man were great in every way."

Georgie made up her mind that her æsthetic bonds should be broken.

She did burst those bonds. How she did it is of little importance. She did burst the bonds; and he, very much surprised, startled almost, at her doing so, found in it only another proof of that weakness from which, being a woman, even the woman he loved was not quite free. For a year after her uncle and only protector's death, Georgie Singleton had defied the usages of the world. She had not offended against its lax morality: that sin might have been forgiven in a young and beautiful woman, well enough off to pay the expenses consequent on her caprices. She had not violated decorum; but she had been guilty of even a more flagrant offence—she had outraged *conventionality*. She was "too young to live alone," society said; and she, only caring for one companion, and being unable to compass his companionship, defied society's opinion, and was in turn put down with that crushing force, against which it is vain to struggle, and hopeless to attempt to rise.

She was not the patient type of woman who can live on in the weary hope of living down an evil report. It pained her to be glanced askance at—to be looked upon in the light of one who had neither done wisely nor well. But she did not deem it worth while to stay and suffer it, especially as going away would be a pleasanter thing than staying on the spot where she had gone through those phases of feeling that had resulted in the eager desire to be quit of the sight of all connected with them.

Arrangements, in her happy state of independence—that independence which had been so hardly judged,—were easily made. A house—a cottage, described as very pretty, and called "The Wilderness,"—was found to let, in the vicinity of a cathedral

town; and when she was introduced, at the opening of this story, she was on her way to make trial of the new home and the new life.

She was not feeling hopeful about it. So many years had gone by in the contemplation of one course—years that she could but mark as failures—that the remembrance of them made her dubious about chalking out a new line, and building up fresh plans. Yet what could she have done better than she had done, since at eighteen she had given her love to one whom every one held to be more than worthy of it.

"Perhaps I should have done better to travel," she thought. "Why didn't I go abroad?" Not but that she was perfectly aware, even while she was making her moan, that a rambling life was too full of inconveniences to suit her luxurious nature. But it was possible that a life of monotony, unenlivened by the fallacious hope that had misguided her so long, would have even a smaller charm for her.

"It will be a wilderness indeed to me," she thought, bitterly; "not but that one place is as good as another, I suppose." With that she shrugged her shoulders out of their comfortable position in the corner, and faced round rather more towards her fellow-traveller.

He was not looking at her, which was very gratifying to Georgie; but her eyes rested on him for an instant, and then turned away disdainfully.

"A commercial traveller, probably," she thought, scornfully. "What can a man be who can come away from town at this hour without securing the *Times*, to see the latest telegrams. By-and-bye, the stranger, as if in answer to her thoughts, drew from his pockets a journal so folded that she could not see its name. This he read attentively. She waited until he put the paper aside with the air of a man who had done with it, and then said,

"Will you allow me to look at your paper?"

He started, and turned round in a sort of confusion

that deepened her belief in his being a commercial traveller.

"I'm afraid it is not what you would care to read," he said hurriedly; "it is merely a piece of the journal of the Anthropological Society. I really——"

She bowed her head, blushing a little. "Thanks," she said, "it would not interest me;" and with those words their intercourse came to an end.

The bright February day was drawing to a close when they reached the station at which Miss Singleton had to alight. Before she could rise from her seat, the strange gentleman jumped on to the platform. Presently, when Miss Singleton stepped out, languidly, he was gone out of sight, and the lady felt annoyed that she had even noticed that he was so.

Her home in "The Wilderness" was a charming spot. A little dark, Elizabethan house, perched midway up a hill, with a garden in front of it. A house in which there was never any occasion to go upstairs: for dining, drawing, bed, and dressing-rooms were all on the one floor, to which you gained access through a French window that opened into a hall that was, perhaps, the prettiest room in the house. The former occupants of the place (an old half-pay officer and his wife) had spent nineteen years in beautifying "The Wilderness," and then had given it up because a new generation had sprung up, who left them to be dull in their pretty home. "As I shall never have any one to speak to, I had better get to take an interest in inanimate objects," Georgie thought, strolling to the window. "The view will do," she added, approvingly, as she lifted her arms above her head. It must be granted that her approval was not gained without good cause. Far away to the right, a mass of architecture, thickly studded with trees, with a grandly graceful spire rising in the midst, told of the vicinity of the cathedral town; while nearer, to the left, a little church, and several clusters of houses, proved that "The Wilderness" was

only one in name, for that human habitations were near and many.

For a week or two the fair recluse found that solitude answered very well. For a week or two the old, congenial employments, and the redispositions of old things, and the arranging of new ones, occupied Georgie very pleasantly. She had brought down a good stock of new books; but one gets through many volumes very easily in the course of the long, candle-lighted February evenings. When she had read five or six of the typical works of the day, she began to find that there was a vacuum in her new life, formed by the want of some one to speak to about these new books. It was dull to play the part of critic with no one to hear her criticise. Dull to see the full humour of the last melo-dramatic success in fiction, that was palpably fiction on the face of it, in which earls and countesses always appeared as such, and in which the eye aches after a time in distinguishing between what "my Lady Susan" said to "my Lady Adelina," and what my Lady Adelina replied to my Lady Susan! It was dull! dull! very dull! Poor Georgie began to think that her neatness in delivering glib verbal reviews would grow rusty down here from want of practice. She spent a good deal of her time at her piano; not that she really cared much for such music as she could hear herself play, but because she could hear nothing better in "The Wilderness." Then she began to feel cross that not one of the inhabitants of Marling had called upon her. For though "a thing of beauty is a joy for ever," a woman gets tired of contemplating it by herself, after a while. So, when she had reached this stage of dissatisfaction, she condescended to make a few inquiries of her housekeeper, Mrs. Allen, who had been at "The Wilderness" long enough to learn the local names and local gossip.

From this authority, Miss Singleton learnt that there were not many families actually resident in Marling,

but that the few there were, "were high— very high indeed." Further inquiry elicited the fact that this "highness" was not so much a theological as a social attribute. A baronet lived in the white house down in the hollow. If Miss Singleton selected a favourable opportunity, she might see the smoke issuing from his back-kitchen chimney! Miss Singleton promised to snatch a favourable moment for viewing such eminently respectable vapour; and Mrs. Allen went on with her list. The red house on the hill was occupied by an admiral, or a general, a gentleman with two wooden legs who swore a good deal. The clergyman was quite a young, handsome gentleman, and his lady was something above the common (meaning clergymen's wives in general.) There were some decayed gentlewomen in the corner house of the street, who held their heads up a good deal, but who, Mrs. Allen was given to understand, hadn't much cause for doing *that;* and there was the doctor, young Mr. ——."

"Oh, I don't care to hear about village apothecaries until I get migrain," Georgie interrupted, superciliously; and then she went on to express a hope (the mendacity of which was palpable to Mrs. Allen) "that none of these people would call on her."

Notwithstanding this expression of hope, she was well pleased to see that she attracted a goodly portion of observation on her way home from church on the Sunday morning; and though she would not word the wish even to herself, her heart whispered, "I hope some of them will call on me to-morrow. It can't be, that down here in the wilds, people think it odd for me to live alone?" But, even in the wilds, such an opinion is held by respectable mediocrity with regard to secluded beauties of apparently ample means. If Miss Singleton had been ugly, or unprepossessing, she would have been pronounced immaculate, without hesitation. But she was neither of these things; and as young Mrs. Hazelwood, the rector's wife, observed, "One really cannot be too careful, especially situated

as I am—my example, you know, as my husband says. I'm compelled to be particular."

However, curiosity got the better of Mrs. Hazelwood's sense of responsibility, about three o'clock on the Monday after Miss Singleton's second appearance at church. She was a wonderfully pretty little woman, with a habit of always looking well pleased. She adored her husband and gorgeous dresses, and always spoke *of* the former as "Alty," and *to* him, as "Alty, darling," in a way that the decayed gentlewomen at the corner of the street loved to listen to. Indeed, she was very generally liked and admired; and her being an utter and unconditional fool never detracted one whit from this liking and admiration. Why should it have done so? She laughed quite as heartily when a humorous thing was said in her presence as if she had seen the humour of it, and looked as prettily interested when people strove to interest her as if she had understood what they meant. She played the part of rigorous and discreet little matron, too, quite as well as if the slightest strain had been made upon her rigour and discretion, and was altogether as happy and proud of her "Alty, darling," as if she had not been ready the week before her betrothal to him to marry the young ensign whose portrait now adorned her drawing-room wall.

For about half-an-hour, the prettiness of the little ecclesiastical dame, her folly, and her vanity, amused Georgie very much; but, at end of half-an-hour, the amusement palled upon her.

"You have been reading, I see, Miss Singleton?" she said, taking up one of Georgie's books. "I read a great deal. I read everything. Do you read everything?"

Georgie confessed that she did not. "Oh! but you should," Mrs. Hazelwood said, shaking her head a little, "you should not be prejudiced. Alty says 'every one should read everything,' and I think so too."

"Your mind must be too well stored," Georgie suggested gravely, "I am afraid confusion would reign in mine, if I attempted it."

"Now, novels," Mrs. Hazelwood began, with her most bright-eyed air, "some people, you know, object to them; well, I read them—all—and they never do me any harm."

"It does great credit to the novelists, and to you too," Georgie said, laughing.

"Some of them are really very good—quite improving, if they are only read in a right spirit, Alty says; I was reading one yesterday, that I'm recommending in the parish. It's against the vice of intemperance. A lady begins by drinking sherry, and ends in a madhouse—quite a useful warning, I wish you'd read it."

"But, I'm very fond of sherry. It would be a painful warning to me," Georgie said, laughing.

"So am I," Mrs. Hazelwood exclaimed, laughing much more heartily than Georgie, "one never applies those things to one's self—that would be a narrow spirit to read them in, Alty says. I'm so glad you like flowers," the lively little lady cried, skipping away to another subject. "I should be lost without flowers, —Lady Constance composed some exquisite words about me in my greenhouse, that Alty says it's quite wicked to keep for private circulation; but I say, the public mightn't care for it, might it."

"Very probably not," Georgie said.

"Oh! but I think they would take, because they are so very pretty; are you fond of music,—I'm a slave to it. The piano says so much to you, doesn't it, when you're sad."

"I'm never sad," Georgie said, shortly. "Nor am I," the other cried, blithely. "I can't think why anybody is; it's quite a joke between me and Mr. Mervyn, our doctor, that I want sal-volatile," and the lady laughed at her poor joke quite enjoyably.

Georgie would have delighted in the society of her

pretty little visitor, if any one had been with her, who would have been sympathetic in a proper appreciation of the pretty little visitor's profound foolishness. As it was, she was not sorry to see young Mrs. Hazelwood depart, which she did, presently, in a burst of uncalled-for gladsomeness.

"A fascinating fool," Miss Singleton said, gazing after her, from the window. "I wonder what Alty is like." As her thoughts reached this point she caught another glimpse of Mrs. Hazelwood, far down in the road, standing with her fair, smiling face upturned towards a gentleman on horseback. "They are talking of me," Georgie thought, as the gentleman glanced up towards "The Wilderness;" and then a slight feeling of being offended crept over her, as she recognised her handsome fellow-traveller of the other day. "At any rate, he can't be a commercial traveller," the lady thought, sauntering back to her low seat. "A country squire, or a gentleman farmer, perhaps."

Meantime, the pair she had been looking at were talking about her. "Good morning, Mrs. Hazelwood!" the gentleman had exclaimed, in that peculiarly hearty tone of pleasure, called forth from most men by the sight of a very pretty woman.

"Oh! Mr. Mervyn, I'm so glad to see you," said Mrs. Hazelwood. "I have just been calling on the new tenant at 'The Wilderness.' She's lovely; but I can't make her out at all. Of course, I wouldn't breathe it to a soul but you for the world; but she's not quite dressed as an unmarried woman should dress—overdone, you know. Of course, married women *ought* to wear such things. But it's not good taste, is it, in young ladies? I wouldn't say it to any one but you, because some people would think me unkind."

"I'll think you particularly kind if you will introduce me to the lovely stranger."

"What will Miss Custance say?" (holding her head

in a bird-like way, on one side, to represent archness) for there was a rumour raised (chiefly by Mrs. Hazelwood herself) that Miss Custance, the baronet's scraggy eldest daughter, was ready to smile kindly on the young doctor.

. "Oh! Miss Custance" (impatiently). "I want to hear about Miss Singleton; is she a wandering star, painter, poetess, novelist,—what?"

"No!" Mrs. Hazelwood answered, hesitatingly, "nothing clever, I should say. I asked her about reading and music, and she didn't seem to care; I never think well of people who don't seem to care for reading and music, do you?"

"I think I am a little more lenient to those benighted ones," he said, smiling.

"But I'm so fond of books and music, myself," the lady went on, opening her beautiful foolish blue eyes to their fullest width; "but come, now, shall I be kind and give a little party for you to see Miss Singleton?"

"You're sure to do what is kind," he said, raising his hat and riding off; and then Mrs. Hazelwood went on to call on Lady Custance, and to tell her, *in confidence*, the same things she had told Mr. Mervyn, *in confidence*, respecting Miss Singleton, the stranger.

Months crept on, and Miss Singleton still held out, at Marling, against dulness, and the being suspected of every crime in the calendar. Neuralgia, and Mrs. Hazelwood, had each been instrumental in making her acquainted with Mr. Mervyn, and the young surgeon had played his cards in such a way that Georgie was placed in the painful position of not being able to despise a man whom she had made up her mind to despise. She tried hard to harden her heart, for a while. She tried to believe in the report of his engagement—a report which was spread by other people, and to which he never alluded. She tried to think that her *heart* had worn itself out in that long struggle against hope, which

Walter St. Aubyn had forced it to make, and she failed. At last the old love stood revealed as the treacherous, untrue thing it had been. The old love had subtly involved her in such a web, that she seemed false to all fine feeling in trying to break through its meshes. And yet now, she knew she had been right, in so striving to break through it, and she began to feel that there was balm in Gilead—even the soft soothing balm that a new hope, and a new love, only could apply. It bound up her old wounds, this knowledge that she had, that there was such a thing as a self-sacrificing, unselfish love, ready to be proffered here. The sumptuous beauty felt grateful that not one of her personal charms were lessened by the wearing course of those wasted years—but, that all were as capable as ever of redounding to the credit of the taste of the man who loved her. As soon as she had known anything in Marling, she had known that Mr. Mervyn was regarded by Miss Custance, her family, and friends, as due to her (Miss Custance) whenever he paid himself over in matrimony to any one. This belief, whatever it was grounded upon, had gained a wide hearing, and Miss Custance, a virgin who had called herself twenty-nine for more years than her friends cared to count, was in nowise reticent on the delicate point. Now the Custances were people of considerable local importance, and it had been necessary that Mr. Mervyn should stand well with them. He had therefore manfully disregarded hints, advances, and love-making, on the part of the eldest daughter, until he found that quiescence was taken for acquiescence. Then he made a slight stand that brought about an explanation that had almost stunned him. Sir Thomas Custance had roared the question at him, interspersed with many expletives, "What he thought of himself for letting them all suppose it was an understanding between him and Cornelia?" adding the comforting assurance that he (Sir Thomas) was not the man to stand that

sort of thing, and that an engagement it must be, or he should proclaim that Mr. Mervyn had acted dishonourably. Lady Custance glibly run over the greater portion of the "Army List," as she mentioned the names "of a few of those whom Cornelia had refused, considering herself plighted to Mr. Mervyn." Cornelia herself discreetly vanished from the scene of controversy, as her nose and cheeks were rapidly acquiring a high scarlet polish from much weeping. The end of it was that, as they refused to consider him anything but engaged to Cornelia, and as he had no desire to marry any one else then, he drifted into the amiable error of suffering them to say their own version of the subject. But when he fell in with Miss Singleton, he quickly expiated his mistake in bitterness of spirit. It is not too much to say that in a little time he loathed Miss Custance, but she had the odious art peculiar to women of her order, of ignoring such loathing, and developing greater affection for him in the face of it. Cornelia Custance was not an actual fool, therefore she soon found out the cause of Mr. Mervyn's increased distaste to her. But though she was not an utter fool, she was a fool in this, viz., that she would indulge her venom by saying abusive things of her rival, and these things she frequently elected to say to Mr. Mervyn. "She is not at all the sort of person that I could ever be jealous of," the fair Cornelia would say, "still I wonder at you going there so often; the woman's house is a regular trap arranged on purpose to set her off."

At last he laid bare this root of bitterness in his tree of life to Miss Singleton. He had been weak, but not from anything else that the woman he really loved could find it hard to forgive. He had gone astray into the Custance dismal swamp, out of easy-going good nature. But he was determined to rescue himself, and after a brief time, Georgie was ready to aid him.

Before long, Marling nearly maddened itself with

suggestions, and prognostications of evil to both of them. But Mr. and Mrs. Mervyn bid fair to falsify the kind prophetic visions of their numerous acquaintances. The old love in the one case, and the hollow mockery of it in the other, had bid fair to be a root of bitterness that would attain to such a growth as should overshadow both their lives. But they have been fortunate enough to dig it up, and destroy it. And though, as young Mrs. Hazelwood observes, "It would be much pleasanter for them both if they could feel as Alty and I do, that they had never cared for anybody else—at least, for anybody else to know it, you know," they are very happy.

fussy, small, self-important man, who fought furiously for trifles, and raged impetuously against small obstacles, conceded the point against his better judgment, and suffered the request to go forth.

Lady Diana (or rather her parents for her) was acquiescent. She even selected the name Mabel, and sent from Brussels, where the Paintons were at the time, wonderful things for the little baby's use. Then, for ten or twelve years, there was no other than business intercourse between the families, and that little matter of the sponsorship seemed to have entirely escaped the memory of the aristocratic young godmother. During those years, Lady Diana had come out, and caused a sensation, and once or twice, her approaching marriage with some or other noble minor, had been announced as to be "celebrated on the coming of age of Lord so-and-so." But facts had nullified these announcements; and, when twelve years after Mabel's birth, Lord Painton and his family came down to Ormley, Lady Diana was still unmarried.

Mabel was introduced to her notice then; but the young lady was uninterested, *distrait*, absorbed in some other thoughts, than those her godchild could have given rise to. The interview was a brief one, and Mabel carried a very dim idea of Lady Di. away with her. "She gave me these—and these," the child said, showing a lot of pretty things that Lady Di. had incontinently huddled together and thrust upon Mabel, hoping to hide the forgetfulness which had caused her to come down without a proper present.

"And did she kiss you, and tell you to come again," Mrs. Arundel asked.

"No, she didn't," Mabel said, shaking her head gravely," she looked tired, and seemed glad when papa called me away—and I don't want to go and see her again."

This was when Mabel was twelve; but when she was seventeen, the Paintons, who had scarcely been at Ormley at all during the interim, came down again for

a lengthened stay; and still the beautiful daughter of the house, who had been painted by all the first portrait painters, and very much celebrated in the fashionable papers, was unmarried.

Lady Diana was twenty-seven, and very beautiful she was—with the large, fair, fine, blue-eyed, blonde, brave beauty, that is so essentially a characteristic of the women of the English governing classes. Mabel Arundel thought that in all her life she had never seen anything so stately, and so grand as her godmother; and timidly in her young mind she compared Lady Diana to Guinevieve, and wondered much where the Arthurs and Lancelots could be.

The Countess of Painton was dead now, and Lady Diana ruled her father's house, and regulated his hospitalities. Her less lovely sisters were married long ago, and her brothers both had wives and establishments of their own. She was the sole child of the house left, and Mrs. Arundel told herself with a beating heart, in her maternal anxiety, that if Lady Diana willed it so, she could do a great deal for Mabel.

Mabel was just home from a fashionable finishing school in Brighton, when the family came back to Ormley. The other Arundel girls had been trusted to the tender mercies of the Lexford Ladies' Seminary; but Mabel, by reason of being the godchild of a Peer's daughter, had been deemed deserving of extra efforts. Accordingly, she had been sent to a fashionable school, where she had learnt French from a Parisian master, and music from a German master, and dancing and deportment, and how to do her hair, and generally demean herself as became a young lady of great pretensions.

She came home very much what girls do usually come home from such an establishment. She knew how to make the most of her good looks, and how to put her hat or bonnet, and mantle, and dress on, stylishly. She knew how to come into a room, and how to walk along an esplanade, and how to bear stares—

critical and admiring—with an air of conscious self-possession. She knew how to rattle through brilliant drawing-room pieces by Hertz and Kühe with effect and attractive execution. She knew enough French to utter ejaculations in that language, which she would have been ashamed to utter in her mother tongue. She knew how to talk about the latest novels—not because she read all of them, but because she skimmed through the criticisms; and she knew how to play croquet, and she knew little else.

This last sentence is not written of her in any disparaging or censuring spirit—very few girls of seventeen in her position do know more than Mabel did after a couple of years polishing at the hands of strangers. The girl was pretty, pleasant, frivolous. How should she have been otherwise, grown in such soil as the Arundel household, and nurtured at a fashionable boarding school.

A thrill passed through the Arundel household when there came a note from Lady Diana to Mrs. Arundel, courteously asking that lady if she would allow Mabel to spend a day at Ormley. It was as many such middle-class households are apt to be—a very dull one. Such a break as this promised to be, in its normal monotony, was rapturously hailed, not only by Mabel, but by her sympathetic family. Two of the three girls who were older than Mabel were married to wealthy tenant farmers in the neighbourhood; but the third was at home, and was deft with her needle; and Mabel was gracious in giving her sister plenty of occupation with it.

Mrs. Arundel read the letter, and coloured up like unto a beetroot as she read. Then it was handed round and eagerly conned by the other two. Mr. Arundel was out on business this forenoon, but his wife felt that there was no need to consult him before she wrote an answer to Lady Diana, and accepted the invitation for her daughter.

"The day after to-morrow—I shall not have time to get anything fit to wear," Mabel said, reading the note

again, when the acceptance to it was despatched. She was very pretty, rather tall, very slight and graceful, with a delicate-featured face, large dark-lashed violet eyes, and great quantities of light brown hair. She had a little trick of tossing her head and curling her lip when she spoke of anything that did not quite please her; and she tossed her head and curled her lip now.

"In summer you can't wear anything prettier than muslin, and you have a lot of muslin dresses, Mabel," her sister Fanny said, consolingly.

"But not one fit to wear, I tell you," Mabel said, pettishly. "The mauve is washed out, and the blue isn't gored well, and the others have blonde and ribbon about them; I can't go over in the morning to Ormley in a *demi-toilette;* and my silk is too short."

"Lady Diana always dresses very plainly in the country herself," Mrs. Arundel suggested.

"That's just it, mamma—I can't and I won't go fine: if Lady Diana dressses very plainly, she always dresses very properly."

Then there came a period of despair, and then one of contrivance, and then one of hope. Mabel was made happy by being driven into Lexford that afternoon, and suffered to buy a white piquè dress and jacket; and Fanny was made happy by being set to work upon it, in company with the parlour-maid in an upper chamber, from whence they did not emerge until Mabel's dress and jacket were ready to put on.

She looked very pretty in the costume that had cost her sister a sleepless night; when the day came, and with it Lady Diana's own little brougham to fetch her. Her complexion was young and fresh, and fair enough to stand the contrast of the dead white, and she herself had superintended the cutting out and setting in of the skirt, therefore the fall and slope, and fall of the latter pleased her. Her white sailor's hat, with a blue ribbon round it, was bright and pretty, and simple, too;

and she was perfectly gloved, and neat as a Frenchwoman about the collar and cuffs. Altogether, her appearance was very pleasant to Lady Diana as she walked into the large, luxurious, and most comfortable morning room at Ormley.

But Mabel's bright, girlish, slight beauty was dwarfed and rendered insignificant by the stately grace of the lady who rose to greet her with a great sweet kindness that impressed the girl at once by its genuineness and absence of all tricky effort.

"So you are my godchild," she said, drawing Mabel towards her; and then, as Mabel held her blushing face up towards Lady Diana, kissed her on her smooth cheek, and added—"I am very glad to see you, and to see you what you are; it will be very easy and pleasant to fulfil all those duties towards you which have been neglected so long. Here comes papa to be introduced to you."

Mabel turned, and saw an old gentleman advancing towards her from the door—a pleasant-faced old gentleman, portly and good-humoured, apparently—a trifle less dignified in bearing, and several shades redder in the face, than she had anticipated seeing the Earl of Painton. She found it was not at all a difficult matter to stand erect before him, and to answer him with something of the saucy independence with which she was wont to answer her papa and his compeers.

"This is Mabel Arundel, papa. I told you I had asked her to spend the day with me," Lady Diana said, smiling.

"So you did, to be sure—to be sure; your godchild, Di; you may be proud of her, I'm sure; she does credit to our part of the country."

Lord Painton shook Mabel's hand heartily, and scanned her from head to foot. Evidently, he was an observant old gentleman, as well as a pleasant-faced one.

That day passed quickly and delightfully. Mabel

had but one drawback to her felicity the whole time, and that was the half fear that the dress which she was to wear at dinner would not arrive in time. With the exception of that solemn thought, it was all bliss and bright sunshine this first day at Ormley. Lady Diana was well inclined to know her godchild thoroughly, and not superficially. So much was evident. The lady questioned the young girl about what she had seen, and what she had learnt, and what she had read; about her likes and dislikes, her tastes and habits, her customary occupations, and her hopes and aspirations. These latter were not very lofty. So much was clear to Lady Diana after a very short examination.

Mabel "supposed she should not always live at home, therefore she didn't care much about doing anything in the garden. Two of her sisters were married —but they had only married farmers." (This was said rather scornfully.)

Lady Diana interposed gravely—"She knew Mr. Garton and Mr. Burroughs very well by name and repute, and knew how highly they were thought of."

"They're rather rough and uncultivated," Mabel said, blushing; "but her sisters were not so particular as—as she had been accustomed to think ladies ought to be." Lady Diana turned the subject by asking how Mabel usually employed her time.

"Why it passes very slowly, to tell the truth," Mabel said, a little discontentedly. "You see, after Brighton the place seems so dull, and the people so dowdy."

"Yes, Mabel," Lady Diana said, looking at her steadily; "I think Brighton was a very bad school for you;" and at this Mabel coloured quickly, and felt conscious of looking amazed, for had she not been sent to Brighton principally because she was Lady Diana's godchild, and so worthy of all the polishing that could be procured for her.

"Will Mr. Arundel be able to leave his unmarried

daughters comfortably provided for, papa," Lady Diana asked that night, when Mabel had gone home.

"Eh? no, I should say not," Lord Painton replied; "but this one has a face that is a fortune—she is a very fine girl, Di—as fine and good-looking a girl as I ever saw."

"She is very pretty, but I'm afraid she has been trained to be frivolous, insufficient, and vain; I do hope I may be of use to her while I am here," Lady Diana said, thoughtfully.

"You will be here such a short time, that is the worst of it," her father said ruefully; "Arminger and you have fixed on September, haven't you?"

"Yes," the grand beauty said, smiling gloriously; "but you can't complain of my having been in a hurry to marry and leave you; I'm regarded as a hopeless, confirmed old maid, on account of the great age I have attained."

"I shall not stay here when you do leave me," Lord Painton went on, thinking (as was this genial old gentleman's habit) "an English house in the country without one's own womankind is the very devil; I shall go abroad again; what a Hebe that girl is to be sure," he continued, his thoughts reverting to Mabel. "I hope Arminger will be able to spare time to take a sketch of her when he comes."

Mabel, meantime, had gone home, and was feeling home to be very bleak, and confined, and muddled, after Ormley. "Lady Diana is splendid," she said, in answer to her mother and sister's eager questionings; "but she talks a great deal about idleness, and seems to do no end of things herself. I think she wishes me to be a great deal there. Lord Painton is not a bit aristocratic-looking—he's fat and red faced; but he said Lady Di had cause to be proud of me," she added, with a little sparkle of vanity.

"Mab's in luck's way," Fanny wrote to one of her married sisters shortly after this. "She can't come

with me to your party to-morrow because she has gone to stay a week with Lady Diana at Ormley."

"I wonder Mab doesn't feel awkward there," Mrs. Garton said, showing this passage to her husband; "but she always was quite a little lady, and going to Brighton has done wonders for her."

"It has made her a more selfish, conceited minx than she was before," Mr. Garton said laughing; "and this Ormley business will just about finish her off."

"I think it will do her good, John. Lady Diana makes Mab read really good, clever books, and talk to her about them; and she's making Mab ashamed of lolling about all day, doing nothing; Mab was telling me, the other day, that it's quite a mistake to think that the aristocracy are lazy and idle—not that I ever thought so, but I know that Mab had some such idle idea in her head."

It was quite true. Lady Diana was very earnestly striving to impress Mabel with an idea of the dignity and nobility of work. "It is only the weak in mind or body who are exonerated from the cries that is on all humanity to do something, and to let that something be as good and useful as possible," she would say to Mabel. "You can always find something to do—at least, I can; something that will aid or ease another, or that may fit you to instruct another at some future time."

"But I don't know when to begin," Mabel had said, hopelessly.

"Begin close at hand; read books that will seem dull to you at first, because they speak of things of which you never heard—they will lead you on to others, and be careful that your reading does not interfere with your home duties."

"I don't seem to have any," Mabel said, despondently.

"Oh! but you surely have; can you not help your father and mother—at any rate, help them with your

interest in what they have to do; and to feel an interest in their work you must understand, and the effort to understand it will give you something to do; your little nieces and nephews will fill up your spare time soon."

"Have your little nieces and nephews filled up any of your spare time?" Mabel asked.

"Indeed they have; during the last four London seasons I have been happy enough to help two of my nieces with their music four hours every day."

"My nieces have no talent for music," Mabel said.

"Then fit yourself to help your sisters, by learning something else to teach them."

"I may be married by the time they want to be taught," Mabel said.

"So you may—then you will have other duties; but you won't be unfitted for them by the course I advise."

"Dear Lady Di," Mabel said, passionately; "it's easier for you than for me to be good and useful; you're rich and happy, and you have no anxieties——"

"Mabel!" Lady Di interrupted, gravely; "for many years I had heavy anxieties, but I would not let them weigh me down; I will tell you some day what they were."

"Are they over now?" Mabel asked sympathetically.

"Yes, dear—happily over; now tell me of yours."

"Why, I often think that if papa were to die, and I was not married, I should be a pauper;" and Mabel burst out crying at the prospects she had conjured up.

"Another motive, dear Mabel, for you to work hard, and learn to do something by which you may support yourself; no woman with a cultivated mind and a willing hand and heart need be a pauper. I know scores of young, delicately-nurtured girls who are supporting themslves nobly, cheerfully, honourably."

"How? as governess?"

"Many as governesses—more as painters, writers, and musicians."

"Did you know such people?" Mabel asked, wonderingly.

"I am fortunate enough to have a large acquaintance amongst the artistic and literary world," Lady Di said, holding up her head; "I am going to marry a painter myself."

"You?"

"Yes—even I," Lady Di said, laughing. "That was the trouble I had. Ten years ago, when I came out, Mr. Arminger, then a very young and almost unknown man, painted my portrait, and I fell in love with him—that was the reason I could not marry others, who fell in love with me," she said, with a stately simplicity that became her regal beauty. "Well," she went on, "we drifted apart, and, as years went on, I heard of him as constantly rising, both in his art, and in public estimation; and when, a year ago, we heard of him in Rome, at the same time as ourselves, I persuaded papa to ask him to paint my portrait a second time. He did so; and then I was rewarded for my nine years' patience; for he asked me to be his wife, and I am to be married to him in September."

"And you might have been married to an Earl," Mabel said, with a peculiar expression flitting over her face—an expression of half-contempt, which escaped the notice of Lady Di.

At last it dawned on Lady Di one day, that she was not the only one at Ormley to whom Mabel's presence was pleasant. Lord Painton rarely missed an opportunity of presenting himself in his daughter's morning room, and paying a compliment to his daughter's fair young companion. And Mabel grew excited about the possible recurrence of the visits, and watchful and anxious for the compliments; until, at last, Lady Diana's eyes were opened to the fact that her father was making love to her godchild.

She spoke about it at once to him, bravely. "Papa," she said, "it is not seemly on your part to flatter

Mabel so. Consider the difference in your ages and your stations."

"I'm not too old to know a monstrous fine girl when I see one," he said touchily; "and as for the difference in our stations: the wife rises to her husband's rank, whatever it may be."

Lady Di started. "Papa, you do not think of offering marriage to Mabel Arundel? you are not going to buy the hand of a girl younger than some of your grand-daughters?"

But Lord Painton only fussed and fumed, and declared he would not be dictated to. That Di had made her own choice, and could not say anything to him for marrying beneath him—if he did marry; what was she going to do herself, he should like to know?"

"No woman would marry beneath her by marrying Mr. Arminger," she said, calmly; but though she spoke calmly, she felt utterly out of gear, by the reflection that she had missed her mark in openly remonstrating with him on the subject of his palpable infatuation for Mabel Arundel.

There was degradation to the high-born lady in the thought of such a marriage. After all, Mabel was only the daughter of one of her father's hired servants, but this Lady Di could have overlooked, if the girl herself had been other than she was. But the most partial friendship and the lenient judgment could not blind themselves to the fact of Mabel being, if not exactly frivolous in mind and manners, at least lacking in stability in both. The young head was very bright and beautiful outside, and nearly all the soul Mabel had was in her violet eyes. Lady Di thought with almost a shudder of the callousness and vain glory that must be in the girl's heart, could she contemplate giving herself in all her youthful physical freshness and purity, to the old man of seventy.

It would be worse than useless; it would be a terribly false move, Lady Diana felt, to ask Mabel to

cease from coming to Ormley; for if Mabel ceased to come, the ardent old lover would only the more surely go after her. It would be unfilial folly to allow the evil to grow, without making an effort to stop it. Accordingly, Lady Diana bided her time; and soon Mabel brought about a good opportunity of a remonstrance.

The girl had been at Ormley to luncheon one day, and had been peculiarly well-dressed, and peculiarly adventurous in her manner of seeking and accepting Lord Painton's attentions. She had coquetted with him until he seemed on the verge of senility with gratification and admiration. She had even gone so far as to infuse a far greater amount of freedom in her manner towards Lady Di; and had worn a diamond ring with a sort of defiant consciousness, that made Lady Di feel very sure that the ring was the gift of her father.

After luncheon Lord Painton (who was gallantly keeping at bay a whole army of gouty symptoms) invited Mabel to go out with him to look at a new Italian garden he was making; and Mabel, with crimson roses in her cheeks, and diamonds in her eyes, was bounding after him, when Lady Di rose and checked her.

"Wait for me, Mabel," she said, "I am coming too."

A look of absolute annoyance and impatience passed over Mabel's face. If she had only been permitted to go out with him alone, she would have come in pledged to wear the coronet, she felt sure. However, the habit of obedience to Lady Di was not to be cast aside yet. So she waited, chafing at the delay in the attainment of her ambition, suffering her whole heart, and the hopes that filled it, to be read like an open book by Lady Di.

In vain that day did Lord Painton ingeniously attempt to get rid of his daughter on divers pretences. She would not give him the opportunity he was pant-

ing for, of making a fool of himself. At last he gave up the attempt, and retired huffily to his library to write, he said; and Lady Di carried Mabel away with her to her morning room, where Mabel subsided at once on to a sofa, and into a sulky silence.

The opportunity was come, and Lady Di used it. "Mabel," she began, "do you doubt me when I say that I consider it my duty to tell you when I see you doing wrong?"

Mabel looked up quickly, but made no answer.

"I hope you do not doubt me," Lady Di went on, kindly; "I feel it to be so strongly and clearly my duty to tell you of something now—my duty, both as your godmother and Lord Painton's daughter. You are hoping that my father will ask you to marry him, Mabel; and, if he does, what are you meaning to do? I will tell you, you need not answer me that question—you will marry him to be in the position of a great lady, and I shall despise you; and, worse still, you will despise yourself."

"Why?" Mabel stammered out.

"Why! need I tell you why? I will then, plainly. Because you will marry out of the station to which you were born; because you will never be able to fill it properly; because you will give yourself to an old man whom you would loathe for a husband if he were not so far above you socially. Tell me the truth, Mabel, if Lord Painton lost his title and estates, if he only had enough to live in commonplace comfort, would you go to him, in your youth, and sacrifice yourself? no—you know you would not."

"Don't be hard upon me," Mabel said.

"Hard upon you in trying to save you, poor child; I will go on painting your lot if you do degrade yourself by selling yourself. None of our family will give you their countenance—even I shall cease to regard you with interest. You are not fitted by education, or association, to mix with the class you long to enter;

I know, to a girl like you, a title is a sore temptation; but, Mabel, make the sacrifice, don't wring my heart by encouraging my father to do what will make me cease from respecting him."

The whole of the conversation need not be narrated; suffice it to say that, in the end, the superior mind prevailed, and Mabel gave in, and promised (with a few tears) that nothing should induce her to marry Lord Painton. She was put to the test soon; for Lord Painton amorously entreated her to do so one day, and she gravely refused him, winning thereby the following gratuitous reward from Lady Di:—

"Mabel, your conquest of your less worthy wishes was noble. You have made a sacrifice for love of me, I verily believe: if ever I can make one for you, dear, I will do it."

A very short time after this, a letter from Mr. Arminger heralded his arrival to claim his bride; and Lady Diana became absorbed in preparations for her wedding. Mr. Arminger was to come and stay at Ormley for a fortnight, then go to town for ten days, and then return to be married. He came on the preliminary visit, and Mabel was introduced to him.

Indeed, Lady Di could not make enough of Mabel just now. Mabel's sacrifice of ambition was narrated to Mr. Arminger; and the handsome artist looked at the girl with interest, as soon as he saw her. Then Lady Di wanted a portrait of her godchild, to take away with her, and he commenced one at once in crayons. It dawned upon him speedily, as he drew the lines, that anything more perfect than the form and colouring of this girl was rarely to be met with. He soon grew to speak of her as a superb model, and to think that it would be pleasant to have such a model near him for ever. He could not keep his eyes away from her perfect face. "She's a mixture of a young deer and Juno," he said enthusiastically. He had been used to cultivated women all his grown-up life, and he

was going to marry a typically beautiful aristocrat. But Mabel's splendid physique was a novelty to him; and he never recognised the inner want, while luxuriating in the outer magnificence. In short, he fell in love with the glorious young animal, and could not conceal his passion from the woman who had loved him, and waited for him so long.

And Mabel? Her godmother watched her keenly; and Mabel's conduct was without spot or blemish. The girl could not control her heart, but she did control her manner. If her eyes kindled, and her bosom heaved when she heard Mr. Arminger coming, she struggled to hide these signals of pleased distress from him. She was what Mabel had never been before —cool and distant to him. Still the lynx-eyed Lady Di read her off, like an open book, once more; and read this time that there was a tussle going on between love and honour. Then Lady Di remembered the pledge she had freely given to the girl; and as she remembered it, she sighed, and made up her mind to keep her vow—let it cost her what it might.

So the day before Mr. Arminger's departure, when it became necessary to speak about some arrangements that must be made before they parted for the last time, before they should be made one, she spoke to him very bravely.

"I believe you wish me to be your wife with all your heart?" she said; and, half guiltily, he said, "Yes."

"But you don't wish it with all your heart now. Stop—don't speak; you're much too true to try and deceive me with words; you value Mabel Arundel's least smile, more than you do my tenderest affection for you now. Let us do what is wisest and best, without any foolish quarrelling and misunderstanding. I could not marry you, feeling that I did not possess your whole heart; and I shall never possess that again."

"This has been a brief madness," he said, feeling crest-fallen; "but the girl is not to blame—don't think hardly of her," he added, eagerly.

"I do not think hardly of your love," she said, frankly—"nor of you either; but hear my decision now—I will not alter it. My engagement with you is broken from this day: you are free to make Mabel your wife. Leave us now; and in a little time, when my father and I have left Ormley, come back and claim her, and make her happy."

It was not pleasant to him altogether, this arrangement, in spite of his love for Mabel. It was hard to lose a Peer's daughter for a wife, because he had such a very keen perception of the beautiful. Still, as she had made her decision, and as he thoroughly knew her firmness, he felt, from the first, that it would be idle for him to appeal against it. So he went away; and Lady Diana soon gave those whom it concerned to understand that she had broken off the engagement.

Six months after this, Mabel, who had been terribly lonely and down-hearted of late, felt herself to be in a dilemma. Mr. Arminger wrote and proposed to her; and though she longed to accept him, the thought of Lady Di would obtrude and deter her. But soon a letter from Lady Diana set her at rest.

"We are settled," she wrote, "my father has had a stroke of paralysis, and it has affected his mind to such a degree, that one place is to him just as another; so, as this place agrees with his bodily health, and I like it, we shall stay here. Ah, Mabel, yours would have been a sad fate if you had not made your sacrifice at my request, and given up the empty scheme of being Countess of Painton. Now, I must speak of something that is nearer to us both—of your marriage with Mr. Arminger; for you will marry him; and I have taught myself to say honestly—I *hope* you will marry him."

"There is no use in making sacrifices for nothing," Mab said, philosophically, when she had read thus far,

"not even Lady Di could expect to hold her father and her lover too, against me."

So the answer to Mr. Arminger's proposal was as favourable as ever Mr. Arminger could have desired; and the artist found, as he had believed he should, a magnificent model, if nothing else, in Lady Diana's godchild.

A HOUSE TO LET.

WHAT a little paradise that was between the long row of poplars and the bushy, glistening evergreens! It stood with its back to a hill and its face to a fair, shining, sloping lawn, that in turn looked into the depths of one of the prettiest copses in England. It was a house, and it was to let, this paradisaical dwelling; and being so charmingly situated, its well-wishers were justified in thinking that it would let well.

Perhaps it could hardly be described conscientiously as a commodious house. It was rife with the oddest and most picturesque of nooks and corners; but then, these nooks and corners, from the utility point of view, were valueless. It had a sloping thatched roof and a tiny verandah, against which things innumerable, from ear-wigs to clematis, crept; and it had a winding path down to the river-side, and a croquet ground, and other things of the like sort, that made it seem to the eyes of youth a most desirable abode.

"It was the very spot in which a poet or a painter ought to pass his honey-moon," passers-by who caught

glimpses of it from the road said—if they did not say that it ought to be tenanted by a young lady whose means were independent and whose health was failing. And then, having given vent to this remark, they would go on to add that they supposed the coachman could tell them who lived there? and as a rule he would reply, "No great shakes."

"What, a common person!" the inquiring mind would go on to question (be it understood at once that inquiring minds in peripatetic bodies only passed by Helmsleigh on the coach), and the reply would boom forth sonorously, "Not a common person exactly"—he (the coachman) would be cautious how he called her that—"but a queer customer! a very queer customer!" Then, probably, the coach would roll on, and the quaint cottage at Helmsleigh and its queer customer of an inhabitant would fade from the minds of both the coached and the coachman.

She was only a care-taker. Has it not been told that Helmsleigh, as the little place was called, was to let? and until it was let the agent, on behalf of the landlord, elected to declare himself much pleased with the person in charge. She had flashed upon that agent in a startling way, and had surprised him out of the small piece of patronage. Nevertheless he had never repented having given it, but, on the contrary, had cited her to other keepers of unlet houses as a model worthy of imitation.

She was only a care-taker; only a vassal; only a hired servant put in that place to vaunt the merits of it, and to show the strangers round with civility who came out of curiosity to see it—and her. For all unconsciously, and very much against her will, she had acquired a local celebrity, and the pretty care-taker at Helmsleigh was one of the objects of interest mentioned to tourists in those regions.

The manner of her dawning upon that neighbourhood was thus: The old master of Helmsleigh Cot-

tage (who was a younger scion of the big stock that ruled up at Helmsleigh House) had died, leaving his only son "lord of himself, that heritage of woe," at the age of twenty-two. The young man, Raymond Helmsleigh, had forthwith taken a first-class ticket by express train to the dogs, in the estimation of all his sober-minded neighbours. That is to say, he had run the gauntlet of an adjacent garrison-town billiard and ball room; and from the former he had come home shorn of his money, and from the latter of his heart.

It was a disgusting thing, in the eyes of the mothers of marriageable daughters in the vicinity of Helmsleigh, to say nothing of the daughters themselves, when Raymond fell a palpable victim to a stranger. A young lady, a temporary resident in the town—she described herself as an artist, and was described by other people as Heaven-knows-who, from Heaven-knows-where—waltzed Raymond out of all regard for the unities, and into an offer of marriage, one night. Every one present, noticing the state of things, denounced her as designing, and him as infatuated. Their judgment was shaken the following day, when it got noised abroad that Miss Babbington had refused him!

"It is only a feint, to make him the more eager," one outraged local maternal parent observed.

"It is only because she is probably married already," another hissed; and a third remarked, with that air of bitter preparation for the worst which obtains so largely among that respectable but unpleasant class who dub themselves Bible Christians, "Even she shrinks from the punishment that awaits a bigamist." Still, after all these things were said, nothing remained but the fact—the stranger, Miss Babbington, had refused Raymond Helmsleigh.

She had come quite alone to that little gossipping, scandalous place; had come there quite alone, to do what it is so hard for a young woman to do in England—earn her living respectably. If a girl's father and

mother have died leaving her poor and unprovided for, people are apt to regard her, not exactly as guilty, but as ready and willing to be guilty as soon as an opportunity offers. Miss Babbington was so regarded; but Miss Babbington had not justified this regard as yet.

Poor, unprotected, and pretty. These were the odds which were against Miss Babbington when her match against the world came off in Helmsleigh. There were many who could have forgiven her for being poor. There were many more who would never have given a second thought to her being unprotected. But when it was seen what a fatal effect her prettiness had on Raymond Helmsleigh, they ("they" in this case representing a section of the neighbourhood) cried aloud for justice and no mercy on the interloper.

Now the story shall be told from her side—from her point of view.

Euphemia, or Effie Babbington, as she had been always called by her friends, found herself at Lufton, the garrison-town nearest to Helmsleigh, one morning under the following circumstances.

She had answered an advertisement which had appeared in one of the most respectable of our metropolitan daily papers "for a companion to an elderly lady." The advertiser requested that all applications should be made in person to "Mrs. Holly, Lufton. Terms liberal. The highest references given and required." This was the advertisement. Effie Babbington, in want of a home, answered it "in person," as requested, and had the satisfaction of finding out that it was a hoax, a practical joke, perpetrated by some idle young ruffian, who cared not how many honest women he defrauded of their time, provided this, the most facetious combination of circumstances he could imagine, could be effected.

Our story has nothing to do with him—one does not, by preference, chronicle the doings of a fool—but we will follow Effie's fortunes from the moment

the truth dawned upon her that the situation and the elderly lady were alike intangibilities. She had expended nearly every pound she was possessed of in the world in this journey, only to find her money and her time wasted. As she stood in the High Street of Lufton, after listening to the postmaster's assurance that no such person as Mrs. Holly existed in Lufton, the girl felt very desperate. It was of no use, she told herself, going back from whence she came—London had been only a hard, big, barren wilderness to her. It was no use standing still and lamenting. Quiescence is only a virtue when well-to-do friends are standing by to help the quiescent. "It was no use doing anything," she was almost thinking, in her despair, when her eyes fell upon the largely placarded notice of a ball at the Lufton Assembly-Rooms, to take place that very night.

"I will go, and see if any one will be pitiful enough to believe me and help me to find employment and a home," she thought. And so she went back to the inn where she had left her boxes when she went out to seek for Mrs. Holly, and unpacked an evening dress, in which, when the time came, she arrayed herself, and went to the ball. She described herself to the ticket-taker as an "artist about to settle in the town;" and she fervently hoped that she looked older than her age, in order that the respectable matrons of Lufton might think it no crime in her to dare to aspire to teach the rudiments of drawing to their daughters.

She was two or three and twenty at this time, looking younger than her years, by reason of the exceeding fairness of her hair and complexion, and the exceeding lightness and slenderness of her figure. A pretty girl, with sweet, thoughtful blue eyes, and a delicately-cut mouth that could look very sorrowful. When she entered that little country town ball-room alone, in a quiet, exquisitely-made black dress, she caused a sen-

sation. But the sensation caused by her distinguished appearance among the men was as nothing compared to that caused by her audacity among the women.

Two or three of the more particular and pugnacious of the lady-patronesses gathered themselves together and determined to demand an explanation. And she, seeing this, advanced upon them, hoping to disarm them by her sweetness and veracity, and told the story of the hoax. "She should stay in Lufton, she thought" (here her voice faltered, and they put her down in their own minds as more depraved than they had believed while she had only smiled), "and try to win her way; she was very friendless, very poor, very anxious to work. Would they help her?"

Would they help her! There was small promise of help in the averted eyes and the hard tones of the self-constituted jury of British matrons who were sitting upon her case. "Under the circumstances," the forewoman of the conclave told her, "it spoke little for her judgment and taste to have forced herself into their ballroom. Why had she not waited, and made her desire for respectable employment known in a more unassuming manner? As she had obtruded herself she must abide the issue." With those comforting words the jury broke up, the spokeswoman brushing her garments aside so that they might not be contaminated by contact with Effie's. "If I had waited I might have starved," that presumptuous young person said as they left her; but she spoke in a very low, broken voice, and perhaps they did not hear her.

Nightly in hundreds of ball-rooms, in some or other gay haunt of humanity, suffering, heart-stricken, desperate, hopeless women must be footing it with apparent ease and blitheness. But perhaps not one more hopeless and desperate than Effie ever belied her heart by her manner. For just two or three hours she would stay, and seem to have a place, however poor, in life's gaieties, she thought. Then she would go out—where?

But before those two or three hours were over things had assumed a different aspect. Raymond Helmsleigh waltzed with her, saw her beautiful, found her charming, and felt himself frantically desirous of seeing more—a great deal more of her, all in a minute. She told him briefly and truthfully the tale of why she was there. And he grew furious with the foolish author of the hoax, and sanguine as to the success of her scheme of setting up in Lufton as a drawing mistress. "All the Helmsleigh interest should be hers," he assured her. Then he went on to tell her that he wasn't much himself, but that his cousin, Philip Helmsleigh, up at the House, was an awful county swell. And Effie listened gratefully, and smiled upon him sweetly.

Before the evening was over the young man had asked her to be his wife—had asked the strange woman, whom every other woman in the room was pronouncing to be an adventuress, to be "Mrs. Helmsleigh." In that offer (since she did not, could not accept it) he wrought her local destruction. They could not forgive him for having proposed, nor her for having refused his proposal. As soon as his infatuation became known it was manifest that Miss Babbington might starve fifty times over, if possible, for any assistance that the matrons of Lufton would render her.

Feeling herself outraged, injured, maligned, unjustly dealt with, and disliked without any cause, incensed the girl out of all prudent judgment. In her heat she vowed that she would stay there, no matter in how lowly a position at first—stay there, and win a higher place than any of the women who had scouted her enjoyed. So when Raymond Helmsleigh went away to recover his spirits, and the cottage was to let, she offered for the situation of care-taker, and got it too.

Raymond Helmsleigh away on his travels, too indifferent to them all to keep up a correspondence with any one since the fatal (to him) evening when he had fallen

in love with the pretty stranger, had no idea that the woman he loved was guarding the home he had left. She went there immediately on obtaining the situation and contrived to live there in some meagre way on the salary that situation brought her, and on the proceeds of water-colour sketches of surrounding scenery, which she sold in the adjacent town. Scores of people came to look at the cottage, avowedly with a view to taking it, really in order that they might obtain a glimpse of the girl whose romantic story was now public local property. "Designing creature! she's staying there hoping to catch poor Raymond when he returns. Depend upon it, she repents bittterly enough that he took her 'No' for answer." This was said by one of the afore-mentioned jury of matrons to Philip Helmsleigh, the head of the house, just returned from a year's trip to the tropics in search of some colour which can only be gained in those gorgeous haunts of nature.

"Refused Raymond, did she?" Philip said, surprised. "She can't be such a mere worthless adventuress as you all want to make her out, or the short acquaintance wouldn't have stood in her way, and she would have taken him while he was in the humour." And then, though he said no more about her, he made up his mind to ride over to Helmsleigh Cottage some fine day soon, and have a look at the much-abused occupant of it.

So the sun set on the following scene shortly: The flowers were lifting up their heads gratefully to the dew that was beginning to fall after a long sultry July day; and on the lawn one little specially fair bed of delicate pink geraniums, bordered with equally delicate blue nemophila, was receiving the contents of a watering-pot, which latter was firmly grasped in the pretty little hand of Miss Babbington. She was alone, to the best of her belief, for the little charity-school girl who did the slight service she required had gone home,

and, believing herself to be alone, she did what people often do under such circumstances, namely, alternately sang songs and talked to herself.

"He will return; I know him well:
He will not leave me here to die,"

she warbled in a way that would have been very gratifying to the writer and composer of that song. Then she checked herself, picked away a withered leaf, and muttered, "I wonder when *he* will return and oust me from here! I'm getting to like it, and to feel at home; so, of course, I shall not be let stay here long. Oh dear! oh dear! 'Home!' I wonder if I shall ever have a real one." Then she dropped speech again, and sang a Bar or two of "Home, Sweet Home;" and then she started back, exclaiming, "Good gracious! what's that?" in most unfeigned alarm.

It was only a strange gentleman advancing rapidly, hat in hand, toward her.

"Pray don't be alarmed, Miss Babbington," he said, courteously, and her ear was greeted pleasantly by the smooth, well-modulated, well-bred tones of his voice. "Pray don't be alarmed, Miss Babbington. I have only just come home, after a long absence, or I should have done myself the honour of calling on you before."

"You are laughing at me," she said, simply. "Men in your position don't call on women in mine. I am the person in charge of this house until it is let. Have you come to see it?"

He was charmed with the sweet serenity of her manner—charmed with the proud humility that would not let her seem other than she was for a moment.

"I have not come to see it, for I know it well," he said, quietly. "I have come to call on a lady whose independent spirit has won my admiration and respect. I shall bring my sisters to call on you as soon as they come down from town. Meantime let me introduce

myself," and as he spoke he handed her a card, with "Philip Helmsleigh, Helmsleigh Hall," lithographed on it.

"Mr. Raymond Helmsleigh's cousin?" she said, looking up from the card to his face, with her eyes sparkling.

"Yes, Raymond's cousin—you know him?"

"I have met him," she said, laughing and blushing; for she knew that Raymond's strange offer and her stranger rejection of it could be no secret to this man.

"I know you have." Then he said a word or two more relative to his sisters calling on her, and presently took his leave of her as if she had been a duchess.

She stood looking after him rather wistfully. He was so much brighter than any thing that had crossed her path for many a long day. "Ah! if it had only been him instead of his cousin," she thought; and then she laughed tunefully at herself for even daring to think such a thing of the Squire of Helmsleigh, of the handsome, bright, clever young gentleman who had the gift of courtesy upon him so strongly that, seeing her for the first time in this humble guise, he should discriminate, and treat her like the gentlewoman she was.

She did not dream about him uninterruptedly for any great length of time. Rumours reached her that his sisters, one of whom was married, and all of whom were notoriously haughty, had come down. Her little hand-maiden told astounding stories of the beauty and splendour, wealth and wonderfulness generally of the Misses Helmsleigh and Mrs. Waring. "They say Mr. Raymond is to marry one of his cousins—leastways if you don't, Miss," she added, correcting herself humbly. For the story of Raymond's love for Miss Babbington had filtered through to a very low round of the social ladder. And when Effie heard of that family arrange-

ment she felt more anxious to see Philip Helmsleigh's sisters than ever.

Philip Helmsleigh's sisters, meanwhile, were thinking that his trip to the tropics must have given him brain-fever. When he first told them the romantic story of Effie Babbington, they were interested to the point of saying they "should certainly like to go and look at her—not that they believed that Raymond had been such a fool." But when their brother told them that their curiosity could be gratified very easily, as he had promised Miss Babbington that they should call on her, their scornful surprise knew no bounds, and a well-grounded fear sprung up in their minds that Philip was a greater fool than Raymond.

Helmsleigh Hall was their brother's property, and it was only their home by his good-will and pleasure. Accordingly they had no desire to offend him. But, on the other hand, it would be equally bad policy to suffer him to drift into matrimony with any one just yet—more especially with such a one as this girl, who had "no antecedents." It may here be remarked that poor penniless had never been directly called upon to render up "her antecedents," and as she never thought of vaunting them it was not known in those regions how unexceptionable they were. Her father had been a naval officer. Her mother the only child of a beneficed clergyman. There was nothing for poor Effie to shrink from when "her antecedents" were on the *tapis*, save the death of her parents, and the distress which had ensued. Nevertheless, her cheeks did tingle when the rumour reached her that the Misses Helmsleigh, aided and abetted by their married sister, Mrs. Waring, were going "to take strong measures to stop their brother Philip disgracing himself by having any thing more to do with a girl of whose antecedents they knew nothing."

"Nothing more to do with her!" and he had had so little to do with her already, she thought, mournfully.

Just a few calls from him, always made with perfect respect and with a kindly motive. Sometimes he had come in company with the rector of the parish, who had found out that the care-taker at Helmsleigh Cottage would be the very person, of all others in the world that he had known, to whom he would most willingly intrust the education of his two little prized motherless children. Sometimes Philip Helmsleigh had come in this good man's company, and at other times he had come alone. But vulgar gossip was busy with Effie's name now; and so he grew more chary of that presence which was like the sun to her—more chary of that presence until he could make up his mind as to whether he would bestow it to her altogether or not.

At length there arose a report in the land that Raymond Helmsleigh was coming home, and Effie began seriously to think about bestirring herself to find another resting-place for the fair young head that had to bear such a heavy burden of toil and uncertainty. The governess mart was overcrowded, as she had tested, to her sorrow, before this. The price she received for her sketches barely repaid her for the sums she expended on paper and paint. She was not a fool, and therefore she did not believe that she had the power to write if only she had the will to exercise that power—a form of folly very frequent among young ladies who find themselves incapable of orginating an idea themselves, or understanding an original idea in others. She was sorely put to to devise some plan whereby she might live reputably, in fact; and in the midst of her perplexity about life, she was in a little distress about love. In fact, poor creature! she had lost the only thing of value she had in the world—her heart; and though she knew where it was, she had not lost it the less surely for that knowledge.

It may occur to some people that Effie, in her poverty and perplexity, must often have regretted her

rash refusal of Raymond Helmsleigh's hand. But, truth to tell, she never did do this. On the contrary, she rejoiced heartily that she had had the courage not to solve her difficulties in that way, telling herself, shudderingly, that if she had married Raymond she should have been a wretched woman, for she felt that she was preordained to love his cousin; and even though (sad fate!) it did not appear as if his cousin felt himself preordained to love her, still any thing was better than to be the wife of one man and in love with another.

But while she was considering and bemoaning herself, Mr. Philip Helmsleigh was making up his mind; and he was considerably aided in this process by his sister Alicia—the one who looked with kind eyes on Raymond. "You ought to try and remove that person before Raymond comes home, Philip," she said to her brother one day. "After the reports, and her absurd conduct in settling down in his house, just as if she couldn't have got employment any where else, it will be horrible if she isn't gone before Raymond comes home."

"Are you afraid he'll fall in love with her again when he sees her?" Philip asked, rather maliciously.

"Not a bit of it," Alicia replied.

"Then why do you want her to be gone?"

"Oh! because our relations would all be so extremely unpleasant, if he kept on hankering after a person we couldn't know."

"But you can 'know' Miss Babbington."

"No, we can't—not in the way I mean, of course. How tiresome you are, Philip! Very few brothers would care to see their sisters compromised in such a way."

"In what way would a knowledge of Miss Babbington be compromising to you?" he asked.

"Oh! in many ways. Now, Phil, don't be angry. I know you like her; but it's out of the question that

we can know her. Get her away before Raymond comes home; do, there's a good fellow."

"I'll try to," he said, in what struck his sister as being a singularly dry tone of voice.

Some three weeks after this, Raymond Helmsleigh came home, to find his cottage in excellent order, and his pretty cousin Alicia waiting in the garden to welcome him.

"Isn't it in good order?" she said, in reply to his expression of gratification at finding things as they were, herself among the number. "The person who took charge of it was really most trust-worthy."

"Who was she?" Raymond asked, carelessly.

"I forget her name," Alicia said, ingenuously. "Never mind, Raymond, tell me about yourself."

"Tell me about Philip: is he married?"

"Oh dear no; nor likely to be. He's away shooting grouse somewhere; he's to be back for the Lufton ball next week. By-the-way, you'll go, won't you, Raymond?"

"Yes," Raymond rather thought he would, though he felt rather sheepish when he remembered what had transpired at the last Lufton ball which he attended. And then the cousins went on half flirting together, as had been their custom of old.

Raymond went to the Lufton ball with the Misses Helmsleigh and Mrs. Waring, and shared the astonishment of all in the room, when, on the names of Mr. and Mrs. Philip Helmsleigh being announced, there walked into the room, leaning on the Squire's arm, the identical audacious young person who had dared to survive all the slights put upon her by the neighbourhood, while she had been living in obscurity in charge of a house to let.

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